

Janos 1

Men of God: An Eight Chapter Creative Thesis

Research Thesis

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By

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Chapter 1: Men of God

A gun barrel to the head; that's all Mark, the youngest member of the group, saw as he carefully caressed the trigger. The man at the receiving end sat still with tears running down his face. A small stream of blood travelled from his nostrils. His black eye looked like a patch of scorched earth. It matched the leather seats of the car, now torn and split with tufts of cotton falling out. Wearing a cold calculated expression, Garret sat in up front. As Lawrence drove he kept his face forward with a stern expression, letting his fedora block his eyes in the rear view mirror.

"Where'd he say we need to go?" Garret asked while rubbing his switchblade with his handkerchief. The bloodied man cringed and forcefully swallowed.

"Towards the old junkyard," Lawrence said making a slow right turn down a side road. The old leather of his gloves cracked as he moved his hands along the wheel.

"Why should we worry about where we throw out this son of a bitch? It's not like he's gonna find out we threw him in the river," said Mark. The man sniffled as the revolver was pushed farther into his head.

"That's what I always thought – who gives a damn? Kid, when you're my age, all those butchered jobs get to you, mess with your head," replied Lawrence.

"That's your generation old man. Let fresh blood show you how it's done."

"Fresh blood does sloppy work, hence the reason you ain't gonna take the shot."

“I’ve never had the chance before to pull the trigger – always been in the back watching while I’m left with the mess!” exclaimed Mark. The man let out a weak sob which was met promptly with a punch to the jaw.

Lawrence slowed the car at a rusty stop sign and checked both directions even though he knew it wasn’t necessary. No one ever came to this side of town unless you had a meeting, whether it was with one of the other thugs or God himself. Officers sometimes responded to gunshots only to find a pool of blood left behind.

“Quit hittin’ him kid, you’ll get blood on the seat.”

“Whatever you say old man,” responded Mark.

Lawrence and Garret looked at each other and shook their heads in unison. Each of them felt a brotherhood expected out of partners in crime, but they never liked the newcomers that didn’t have any respect. Each of them had their marks they were proud of, unlike Mark. Lawrence’s fading color and receding hairline gave off the air of an old timer. Garret was nearly the same with a scar running vertically down his cheek, showing off his experience of lawlessness. Another deep scar ran alongside his body, although few besides Lawrence actually knew where to look for it. Garret had once told Lawrence about the accident that bore the mark, but it had long been melded together with other tall tales. It could have been from a rival gang or a harsh initiation ritual from his youthful days of trouble.

Mark still had that young stench of sweat and hard labor, even though he probably never worked an honest hard day of work in his life. His smooth colorful gave away his rank as a new-timer. The boss always threw promising candidates towards the two, hoping they could show them the ropes. Dean Dawson led the family with iron fists, using his killing squads and

suggestive threats to keep the peace. He never took no for an answer, not that anyone ever had the courage to refuse a job. With his harsh face, powerful arms, and broad shoulders he made you feel small and insignificant, like you were a kid again.

Mark got Dean's attention because of his record at such a young age. He had already committed a string of robberies and killed a number of men. However, Lawrence and Garret felt he hadn't experienced the hardship necessary to be an authentic member. He wasn't a street kid with a rough past like Lawrence. Mark came from the middle ground; he had a mother, father, and lived in a nice house. Mark saw the boom and wanted more things faster than his patience would allow. A few days after his 17th birthday, He'd stolen his father's 12-gauge and held up the clerk at the local gas station only to be stopped by the police and subsequently bailed out by his shocked parents. After a few more incidences, he ran away from home and joined up with the gang, hoping to find people that would promote the decadent lifestyle.

Lawrence found this disrespect for loving parents and the good life sickening. He felt that every newcomer simply ran away from home because they weren't satisfied with having it all. They never got a scar from it either; just a pat on the back and scolding from the folks. Lawrence and Garret were supposed to level these kids' energy; fit their craving for crime with a new code, the family's code.

"Kid, did you check the pockets for anything useful?" asked Garret. "It's always the good part, gettin' to keep the shit you find."

"Nothin' exciting, just this damn cross."

Lawrence glanced into the rear-view mirror at the cross Mark let dangle from his hand. A silver Jesus hung from a dull iron cross. Blue beads marked the rest of the silver chain; their

color was distinct against the cars black interior. The image seemed strange to Lawrence: a man holding a rosary in one hand and a gun in the other. It was as if this was some sort of ritual, a sacrifice to God himself.

Mark let the cross fall to the floor and gave the captive a sinister look, a tooth and gum snarl that showed off his perfectly straight teeth. “Why don’t you carry anything useful on you, huh? At least make it worth our trouble,” said Mark into his face.

Lawrence pushed steadily on the accelerator, letting the needle hit 50. He carefully maneuvered, his headlights exposing the potholes in the road ahead. Lawrence saw the stars and tried to remember some of the constellation names. He thought about heaven lying out there somewhere, far beyond the cosmos with God almighty sitting upon a throne directing the angel of death to the man in their car.

“You a religious man?” asked Lawrence aloud. All three looked at Lawrence. He repeated himself. “You there in back, you a religious man? Only religious men and clergy carry around a cross when they work and you’re not clergy so you must be a religious man.”

The man nodded his head and Mark pushed the pistol harder against his temple. The tears started up again. Mark said, “Noone in here cares about life stories or —”

“Shut the hell up kid. I’m talkin’ to the gentleman you’re abusing, not you,” interrupted Lawrence. He cleared his throat. “You know you’re allowed to talk. It’s not like the silence rule’s enforced.”

“What... what do you want me to say?” the man said weakly rubbing away the tears.

Lawrence chuckled and removed the fedora with his right hand, exposing the receding brown hair marked by spots of gray. He had long since given up trying to hide this aspect of age. “My father was a clergy, or so my mother used to tell me. He left when he met my mother – love at first sight she called it,” said Lawrence. He paused again to look at the man and met his deep green eyes in the rear view mirror. “It was love for my father until my mother got pregnant. See, they weren’t married yet and his folks weren’t gonna have any part of an unwed pregnant woman in their family. One day he grabbed a suitcase and left hoping the ministry would let him back in.”

“That’s... sad,” he said sniffing loudly. “I’m sorry,” he continued.

“No need to be sorry. Mom was a bitch most the time, surprised it took him that long to go. Possibly different before pregnancy – guess I’ll never know,” said Lawrence. He kept looking forward to the road without any expression of regret or remorse. Old and dead; that’s the way you could describe his emotionless face, like a bleached skull that had been sitting in the sun.

“You told me you appreciated her, that she actually helped you,” Garret replied.

“She did me good. Without her, I’d have been a godless prick. Every Sunday she took me to church – was the only time I could stand being around her. Every Sunday I prayed to God to help us with the piling bills, for my mother at her separate jobs to just get us by. Unfortunately, whenever she looked at me in church she saw the man that had left her. Her heart would break all over again.”

“What happened... between you and her?” the man asked, starting to regain his composure.

“She eventually broke down from all the stress: two jobs and childcare. I cared for myself through the majority of my youth, stealing here and there, surviving by any means necessary. Chicago hadn’t treated her well.” He grabbed a cigarette from a near empty carton and motioned Garret to light it. He dug in his pocket for a lighter, and let the flame steadily burn the tobacco. After a long drag, Lawrence kept talking. “She succumbed to prostitution, and I left for the streets. I wasn’t gonna watch my mother let the devil into our household. Without saying goodbye I rode the rails to New York.”

Lawrence continued, “I’d consider myself a man of God as well. Still go to church every Sunday and pray when I can. I’ll make sure it’s quick, a simple gunshot, no beating. A religious man deserves as much.”

The prisoner looked down and bowed his head in silence, showing off his sandy brown hair. Mark followed his head with the gun and pushed it through the mess of hair. “How can you be a man of God when you’re a criminal? Explain me that, preacher’s son.”

Lawrence threw the remnants of his cigarette out the window. “God is honor and forgiveness, justice and equality. We provide just that.”

“I don’t see how we do that,” replied Mark.

“Think about it. We all do things we’re not proud off whether it be stealing or shooting a poor bastard. We ask for forgiveness when we have done these deeds, deeds that must be done.”

“How do you explain justice and equality? We break the law and brutalize people. Just ask this fine gentleman,” Mark said poking the man’s head.

“We provide a balance that’s needed in the world. We help those who have no one else, thus we follow the code. We kill when unjust actions are taken against the nature of man.”

“And you preach forgiveness too. Ha, a hypocrite!”

Garret spoke up. “Sometimes, some men are past the point of forgiveness; not even worth the trouble. You’ll reach a point kid where you’ll have to make a choice about whether or not to pull the trigger. You better be ready to decide cause that’s your life from that day forward – haunted by those eyes staring into the soul you never thought you had.”

“It’s like, what’s it called in D.C. with power, checks and balances. We are the checks and balances to the people. When one man becomes powerful and pushes down all the others, they need to be eliminated,” said Lawrence turning down another country road, this one far bumpier than the last.

“Then... why me?” asked the weak voice in the back. Mark looked deep into the man’s eyes. The blood from his left nostril had started to dry near his upper lip. “I never wanted to keep the poor man down,” he continued.

“We’re just doing our job friend. Now quiet before I take to your face again!” yelled Mark.

Lawrence ignored Mark. “No one ever says they wanted to keep the workin’ man down, they just get all wrapped up in it is all. After that, we ain’t got a choice in the matter,” said Lawrence.

“Listen, I sold the liquor to save my family. The pharmacy is lost; maybe you’ve been in there, sir. The old corner pharmacy on 25th: Joe’s. You can have the place, use it as you please, I’m begging you,” responded the man.

“Now listen here, Joe, I assume, I’d expect better from a religious man. Now you tryin’ to bribe us. You got caught in the middle of a risky business. All sorts of kinds are trying to get into the business now that the good times are done. Desperation makes a man weak.”

“Please, I beg of you, I’ll stay away from all of it, never get involved ever again.”

Joe looked down and paused. With his head down he said, “I thought you were a man of God.”

Lawrence sat for a moment and pondered what the silver man on the cross would do. He thought about how many times he had done these kinds of jobs before, all in the name of a sacred code and his vow to balance the power on the streets. He always had that momentary flicker of mercy before the kill. This was the first time he ever seriously considered it. He thought about stopping at the side of the dirt road and telling him to get out. He’d take him out in the field away from the car and fire a shot in the air telling the man to run.

The images ran through Lawrence’s head, but he soon dismissed them as foolish. He would go forward with the plan, for if he didn’t kill this man then he would fail his own code. He knew it all to be a fairy tale, an impossible world where everyone was happy. Such a world didn’t exist. In this world, one man stays up while the other goes down.

He rebuked his prisoner's plea. "I am a man of God. If I let you go, then I'd be letting you wreck the ground you stepped on. I'm sorry, Joe, but it's really for your own good. Desperation breeds insanity, insanity breeds chaos."

Mark interrupted again, "This pointless shit. God's not even real. If he was real, then he'd save this poor fucker. Where's your shepherd? Answer me that."

He swallowed and responded, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him." He started to sob softly. He whispered, "James 1:12"

Lawrence again felt touched by the man's resolve. He secretly decided that he would pray for Joe's soul and for his own forgiveness in taking away one of his obedient children.

"You're right friend, right indeed," said Lawrence after a short pause.

"You're both wrong. God doesn't exist," responded Mark.

Garret interjected, "Kid, you really have no respect." He removed a cigarette from the carton with a quick flick of the wrist.

"You never make fun of a man's beliefs, no matter what they may be," Lawrence responded.

Mark rolled his eyes. "I still don't see how so many fools follow that crap."

"When you're older kid, when you've lost a lot, when you can't move the way you used to and ain't worth shit, then you'll look to something else to guide you."

The car sped fast down the road towards the junkyard now in sight, only visible by a few weak lights. To Lawrence, this once peaceful drive now seemed tainted. The dark sky looked darker, the dead fields of long abandoned wheat more decayed. With every victim, he knew he was coming closer to the gates of hell, but he never had the courage to stop, only to pray once the deed was done. He drew in his breath as they came closer to the lights, hoping it all was maybe a dream and that he'd wake up from in a cold sweat. But, he knew better. This was his fate, a fate he could no longer escape. He was an executioner bringing a sense of balance to an always chaotic world.

They pulled up to a rusty chain link fence just visible in the car's dim headlights. The brakes squealed lightly, and Garret left the car. He unlocked the rusty padlock of the gate and pushed hard against the fence to create a gap just big enough for the vehicle to fit. Lawrence drove into the lot and Garret followed after, making sure to lock the gate on his way in.

"We're here," said Lawrence, "get out."

"Let's go, move it," Mark said, pushing Joe out of the car, the gun still pushed carefully into his back. Joe limped out, balancing himself on his feet only to be struck down by Mark. His hands hit the ground first, followed by his bloody face. He didn't even try and resist; he simply stood back up and looked around the circle of two men and a mere boy. Memories of the past rushed through his head, mostly of his family, others of his childhood out on the farm. He began to wish he had stayed out in the country with his mother and father instead of chasing a girl into the city and leaving his old life behind.

Garret pushed the man forward thinking he would struggle like they always did, but Joe did nothing. He limped forward to accept his fate without regrets. They pushed him past a pile of

rusty cars, just metal shells now. The other vehicles were lined up in long rows back to front so that it looked like some type of maze. Some looked beyond repair with broken windshields and no wheels, while others still shone as if they were brand new. Stacks of dilapidated tires and other car parts sat against almost every corner, as if they were the guardians of this graveyard. The mechanic's shack, filled with socket wrenches and spark plugs from the last owner, overlooked the entire compound about the size of a football field.

They walked only a few meters away from the car to an area where the light was just faint enough to see their target. Lawrence associated this short walk with nothing but the silent screams of death. He looked at the side door of a nearby Packard and recalled the beaten man they shot; his blood seamlessly blended with the rusty colors. Another man scrambled away after he had kicked Garret in the groin, only to be stopped by Lawrence's bullet. The man wobbled over to the gate and clutched onto the chain link, only to die a minute later from the wound. He remembered one man that had murdered one of Lawrence's longtime friends. After tying him up in the mechanic's shack and beating the poor sucker with heavy tools, Garret picked up a sharp piece of glass from the ground. He quickly sliced his throat in a blind rage and blood went everywhere. Breathing heavily with crimson-stained hands, Garret smiled as he watched the man die. One of the new members with them threw up right then and there. Lawrence didn't blame him. It was hard to watch if you were new to death.

Garret threw Joe against a stack of balding tires and told him to stand still; that it hurt less if you didn't squirm. Joe looked down in horror at the dirt under his feet, all stained with droplets of blood red. The three men stood in front of Joe in the beam of the car's headlights. His eyes twitched as he tried to make out the tall, black figures against the light. Garret walked up, gun in hand, and ready to fire. He put the barrel to Joe's scalp. In the mere second before he pulled the

trigger, Joe looked about himself in confusion with the tears still running down his cheeks. He looked towards Mark who wore a half grin and leaned casually against the car as if waiting in line at the drug store. Then he let his eyes fall upon Lawrence's wrinkled and scarred face, deciding to let this be the last face to see before he died.

But Lawrence saw more in that small time frame; he saw a man of God being executed, a fellow Christian caught in a tangle of deceit. Joe's eyes reminded Lawrence of an injured deer he hit with his own car years ago. The doe landed in a ditch, all its legs broken and its body badly scarred. Its eyes stared straight into Lawrence's own soul as he pushed the revolver into the deer's head. The wide glassy eyes against the soft coat of brown fur were beautiful to him. Joe's eyes had the same spark of innocence, a fragment of hope that he would be saved. To Lawrence, the dead of the graveyard were nothing but blank figures, men without faces. The deer was different; he recalled its features perfectly. To this day, he felt disturbed by this fact, the fact he could recall the deer's face more than the faces of those he had killed.

"Wait," Lawrence said quietly, "I need to do this," Garret looked up from Joe and nodded his head.

"You're the boss," he said. He walked over to Lawrence and handed him the loaded pistol. "Try not to get blood all over the place." Lawrence nodded his head in agreement but couldn't help thinking about when Garret cut the man's throat, and just how much blood there was.

He walked up to Joe and examined the features of his face hoping to remember something, but all he could see was a broken man. He thought it all over in his head: his life of

crime and how he was standing here as a murderer. He wanted to do it himself, kill the image of the man for good, to not be haunted by the faceless figures that filled his brain.

“Stand up straight,” he told Joe.

“Please,” Joe pleaded, “let me go.” Lawrence stood frozen with the gun cocked at the man’s head. He stood there for a few seconds not knowing what to do.

“Come on old timer,” shouted Mark, “Forget how to shoot a gun?”

Lawrence continued to hold his position.

“You...you don’t need to do this,” Joe stuttered. “Be... be... a man of God. Show mercy.”

All Lawrence could think about was the image of the crippled deer and those haunting eyes. Then he recalled the memory he had long forgotten: he let it live. He put his gun away and, rather than putting the animal out of its misery, he let it sit there and die. Something in those flashing green eyes begged for every last moment of life, even if they were painful moments. It was one of the few times he had felt remorse for anything. Even though it was beyond saving, he let it live. He let it live; the words continued to bounce in his head.

Bang! The cold silence of the junkyard ended, and Joe’s body fell lifelessly to the ground. Blood splattered about the yard and the ground soaked it up. Lawrence looked down at the body, a splatter of blood still on his cheek, and thought. “I had no choice,” he said quietly, “I’m sorry.” Despite these words, Lawrence still felt that same absence of emotion that came with every victim. He shook his head and walked back to the nearby car.

“Come on kid, you’re on cleanup duty,” said Garret. “Grab the shovels from the back.”

With a groan, responded. “Next time, I want to be the one that does the killin’. It’s no fun watchin’ it.”

Lawrence turned around and said, “It gets old quick kid. Someday you’ll want to stop doin’ it altogether.” With this final remark, Lawrence removed a plastic rosary from his pocket and tenderly kissed the cross.

Chapter 2: Just Passing Thoughts

Lawrence's feet fell heavy upon the dry ground as he walked home that night. The many faces he saw laughing with joy or acting with a sense of carelessness seemed like blank canvases. The bright dresses and maroon lipstick of ladies passing by were nothing but a mere mask for intense suffering. A sort of endless disparity resonated from the shallow wrinkles of men's skin, as if they carried the physical remnants of sadness with them.

Hard times and depressed appearances were accompanied by a simple color scheme of black and white tie, a vestige of the moneymaking world they longed to return. Instead, they drank away their sorrows in his gang's own illegal products. From the elegant curves of black fenders to the faded advertisements promising "a smoke fit for a new golden age" – it all seemed to be a reminder of the good old days, and as such no one lived in the present. When they drank, they simply remembered that great party days before a familiar world dissipated into thin air.

Lawrence examined these details all the more tonight as all those fake smiles glowed against a star-dotted sky. He moved about like a shadow blending amongst each group, not quite part of anything, but somehow part of it all. The souls opposite him walked in the other direction unaware of the ghostly specters that haunted his judgement. He gave an occasional stare to these individuals only to be met by cold distant eyes.

This short walk to his small apartment was unremarkable, but provided him with the necessary breath of fresh air needed to extinguish the stench of death. The rattling bumpers of vehicle's bumpers were comforting in a regular city life. Old tunes of jazz rang from old bricked buildings, focused less on the working man covering the streets and turning instead to the false belief of the new coming golden age; like everyone else, Lawrence hoped for it.

He veered right along the sidewalk carefully avoiding the people walking en masse and climbed a short set of crumbling steps leading to an archaic green door, where the homeless clung on desperately. Its three story structure matched the other buildings populating the street. However, Lawrence could always recognize the place through its metal plaque praising its once beautiful ivory arches that had long since tinged yellow and eroded away so its many ornate details appeared as amorphous blobs. Some corner bricks of the building had started to become loose, but despite this hazard and the fear of building instability the state had said that such projects at the moment were “unnecessary when there was no money to fix such problems.” However, he could have just as easily enjoyed due to the lack of police in the surrounding area. Whatever the case, he was proud to call it home for the last year and a half.

Lawrence took hold of the doorknob and entered a hallway lit with soft light by the incandescent bulbs held in rusty metal furnishings. Two young men stood by the staircase smoking, the same two men Lawrence almost always saw when coming home at this time of night. He nodded to them and carried himself forward to the staircase.

Running his hand along the elegantly carved handrail, he proceeded to climb to the third floor. Yellowed walls decorated with flowery wallpaper along the top edges reflected the light and cast a seemingly antique look upon Lawrence’s aging face. Down another antique hallway he walked until he came across a door marked by the faded outline of a capital J. Lawrence opened the door with the turning of his key and was met by cool silence.

He stood in the doorway and scanned the messy room lit by a small lamp in the far corner which he seldom turned off. Ties were strewn about the couch, and random socks were scattered around the small table. His only other suitcoat lay on the decrepit remains of an old radio which

he didn't care to fix. The floor was littered with newspapers talking about desperate men out in California that had unsuccessfully robbed a bank and condemnations of president Hoover's economic relief policies. The rest of the room was plain with undecorated walls and a leather chair which he often fell asleep in late at night. Lawrence took a liking to the plain simplicity and silence his home offered; to him it was a shelter in which he could escape the sadness and fear of the outside world. Despite the calm feeling, his head continued to pound violently as Joe's final words haunted his very existence.

He removed his jacket and laid it upon the couch before heading over to a nearby window. He opened it, allowing in the occasional fall breeze and the anxious laughter of partygoers below. The lights in the room adjacent shone bright, something he found suspicious as he recalled turning them off that very morning. Lawrence ceased his relaxed attitude and took hold of the pistol that remained in the holster against his suspenders. He took a deep breath and started to sweat again as he entered the kitchen.

He followed the cracked tiles until he came upon the chipped oak cabinets and slate countertop. A large open bottle of whiskey sat near the sink moved from the cupboard where it had been previously. He also registered the musky scent of tobacco that had become stronger since entering the kitchen. Suddenly he was disturbed by the grunt of someone clearing their throat. With a swift movement, Lawrence turned around quickly pointing the barrel of his gun at the man who was sitting at his kitchen table. The man had a slight gut that protruded forward under his white shirt and plain suspenders. He puffed away on the small brown stick in his hand that looked somewhat like a cigarette, but started to smell distinctly different. His reddened eyes rolled forward as his other hand carefully rubbed a circular piece of metal. The word "POLICE" glinted in the overhead kitchen lights.

“I see you’ve helped yourself,” Lawrence said to Frank with an annoyed inflection.

The man took another puff of hemp and let the smoke carefully caress around his fingertips. He appeared to care little about the smell. “What else was I supposed to do,” he said. “You weren’t here and I wanted a drink.”

Lawrence shook his head in disgust and placed the weapon on the table near Frank’s frosted glass. He poured whiskey into a short glass full of ice cubes. The liquid jumped about in the glass until the mixture finally settled. He pulled up a chair and joined his colleague at the table. For a moment, they both sat in silence enjoying the cool sips of alcohol and the mutual distrust from lawman to criminal.

“Couldn’t you have just waited until tomorrow to meet?” asked Lawrence. Frank started his lighter again. “You know, like we planned.”

“I had other business in the area – figured it’d be easier to get it out of the way now.” He took a sip of his drink. “You don’t entertain much Mr. Woodall, do you?” He took another drag and blew the smoke into Lawrence’s face. Lawrence waved the smoke away; he never did care for the scent of marijuana.

“I prefer personal privacy,” Lawrence said with an irritated gulp of his drink. His cool outward appearance hid the agitation of hosting an unwelcome individual.

“You really should get some better locks too,” said Frank.

“Well, not much to worry about when most expensive things here are worthless,” he said.

“I would’ve thought a main man like yourself would live a little nicer... no offense,” Frank said.

For a brief moment, Lawrence contemplated taking the information he needed forcefully, asking for forgiveness later. However, he remembered again that Frank was man of nothing, whereas Lawrence clung to a code. Rather, he took a deep breath and stared deep into the lawman's brown eyes with an intense irritation.

"Life isn't always about things," he said getting up from his seat. He paused at the window to look at the moon. "It's about where you're going next." He thought again about the faces he couldn't remember, especially Joe's. It was like a wound that wouldn't heal; a deep scar on his personal psyche.

His eyes wandered about the streets below at the myriad of people running to and fro. Those who had escaped economic disaster walked in small groups careful to avoid any contact with the homeless masses that littered every street. They'd walk by and give harrowing glances to each of these men as if they had no one to blame but themselves, that they were the reason capitalism had imploded.

It was amongst this crowd that Lawrence was caught by a tantalizing shade of deep red emanating from a group of black suits. A tall woman with short black hair and a red dress walked in the middle of a group. She went by all bubbly and gorgeous, as if she thought the entire world would stop to look at her. The men with her, they saw in her eyes lust and the echoes of yesterday. A homeless man stared at her with unending awe almost as if he was looking at God himself. He was mesmerized by those high heels and elegant arms that danced about in the moonlight reflecting even the slightest amount of illumination. She appeared as an angelic reminder of beauty's survival, even in the darkest of times.

The homeless man called out something, perhaps a plea for help. Lawrence expected her to look back disapprovingly, maybe even direct some angry notion, but she did not. Instead she paused for a moment allowing her escorts to go along without her while her bright lips produced a tremendous smile. Both Lawrence and the man were struck by the seeming innocence, each of them smiling back with rejuvenated spirit, like men risen from the dead, the bright tones of hope shining from their cheeks.

Suddenly, the woman looked up towards the window in which Lawrence stood. Her eyes pierced deep into Lawrence and he felt an unsettling spell of judgement wash over. The beautiful smile she exhibited started to turn into a solemn expression of regret and guilt, one of undeniable sadness. Somehow she recognized this hidden angst, like the eyes of God were looking directly at a window into his soul. Just as the stare stabbed at his heart, the men came returned to her presence and she walked away, not knowing that she had simultaneously lifted one man's spirit while crushing another's.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" said Frank's voice somewhat startling Lawrence. He turned his head slightly towards Frank and saw that he was standing behind him witnessing the same things.

"Yes... yes she was," said Lawrence trying to regain his composure.

"Even in the saddest of times women will always look good," said Frank.

"It would appear so," responded Lawrence casually.

"They remain strong in spirit where men fall," said Frank pausing to take another puff on his joint. "Don't you think that's so?"

“Don’t know,” said Lawrence. He didn’t want to think about that dead stare any longer; how it cut through him and revealed his most vulnerable places. It reminded him of his mother, the caretaker that shot icy glances of sadness towards his direction as if saying, *“You’re the reason life is hard; you make my world cold and dark.”*

“To make men forget life through a simple touch of the hand – that’s true power,” responded Frank. “Intimacy is the deadly weapon that makes men do whatever she wants. They don’t worry about this so-called Depression. No, they can just run up to any of those poor men sitting outside and they’ll get them a drink despite only having a few dollars. All so they can forget their sad existence over drink with a girl.”

Lawrence looked back into the officer’s eyes for a brief moment before turning his head back to the dirty window pane. It had started to rain and that same man on the street sat out there alone on the corner. He let the heavy drops strike upon his forehead and coalesce into a shallow puddle under the man’s feet. He looked above towards the dark clouds that had begun to take over the night skyline with a bright and youthful vigor not seen since the crash. He let out a deep breath letting a light cloud of condensation dissipate into the cold raindrops. A slight grin washed over his darkened face, the grin of hope, of thanking the unknown for these precious moments of life. This beautiful angel had made her power known, taking Lawrence’s joy and dispensing upon the man with nothing, the man deserving more.

“You may be right,” said Lawrence eyeing the folder in Frank’s gruff hands. “But not in the way you think.” Lawrence moved his hands towards the folder, but Frank withdrew it quickly from his limited reach.

“Not so fast,” he said with an insidious smile. “There’s the matter of payment first.”

Lawrence rolled his eyes and walked over to one of the damaged cabinets. From an old rusted coffee can he removed a few crumpled hundred dollar bills and threw them lazily onto the table. Both men returned to their seats at the table. Frank slowly leaned forward in his chair and scanned the loose bills, all stained in coffee grounds. He took the cash in hand and began to count.

“I thought we agreed on four hundred,” he said eyeing Lawrence curiously.

“Info on some two-bit criminals ain’t exactly worth much,” Lawrence responded.

“I wouldn’t call them nothin’ if they’re an issue for you guys,” he said counting the money again. His eyes shone with a tinge of disgust. Nonetheless, finally he slid the manila folder towards Lawrence weakly. Lawrence handled the folder with great caution as he carefully leafed through the documents.

“That’s everything we know so far, not much,” he said leaning back once again, the joint still stuck between his dull cracked lips.

Lawrence started to study the documents carefully noting the lack of detail within this particular report. Only a few sporadic instances had been investigated and they produced little results as the police were paid off to not get involved in the family’s personal business. It appeared that a few prohibition agents hadn’t let the case go and continued to dig into the case further.

“What happened to the men on the case?” asked Lawrence.

“They got called back to D.C. for some hearing,” said Frank swirling the melting ice cubes of his drink with a dirt-smudged finger. “They’re getting investigated for takin’ bribes –

what a shocker,” he finished sarcastically, both of them understanding the rampant corruption they always possessed.

Frank continued, “The feds told us to figure it out ourselves; they’ve got bigger issues in Chicago.”

Lawrence noticed a marked up map within the folder. Labelled were three different sites where shootings had taken place near the family’s docks. Unknown to the police, a small shipment of whiskey had also been stolen each time during the chaos of the ensuing fight. His eyes were caught by an old photo clipped to the corner of the map. Lawrence removed it carefully to not tear any of its frayed yellow edges.

“Who’s this?” asked Lawrence pushing forward the photo. It was the mugshot of a middle-aged man with short dark hair. His pupils didn’t stare at the camera; rather, they wandered away from the center shot as if worried that the photographer would catch some moment of embarrassment in those eyes. Freckles dotted his nose exclusively, and a scratch ran along his right cheek. The somewhat shaded cheeks complemented the dark collar of his shirt which was torn slightly.

“That’s Albert McMillan, an Irish immigrant who runs a small shop not far from the docks where some of the shootings took place.” Frank took a long sip from his drink and cringed. “He’s been of interest to the department for a while now.”

Lawrence rotated his glass on the table until his eyes caught a few sparkling drips of water caressing the side of the glass. They seemed to change direction constantly amongst the soft light. He studied the handwritten scribbles in the margins of each page. “Why?” asked Lawrence.

Frank let his eyes lazily meet Lawrence. He removed the joint from the crevice of his cracked lips and pushed it into the mixture of smut and remnants that was an ash tray. He proceeded to place his hands behind his head and yawn – a customary aspect of his aloof identity as a dirty cop.

“It’s outside our jurisdiction,” he said. “And let’s just say they don’t welcome cooperation,” he said turning his head to the far window.

He removed the carton of cigarettes from the breast pocket in his white shirt and lay out two cigarettes onto the table. He handed one to Frank and placed the other in his dry mouth. Frank held his lighter close under Lawrence’s cigarette and let the flame color his face in an orange hue. Lawrence breathed in deeply and leaned back allowing the tobacco and nicotine to calm every tense nerve. He narrowed his eyes in suspicion as the smoke clouded Frank’s image. “They’re getting paid off too.” he remarked casually.

Frank quickly turned with an agitated look in his eyes. He replied in a dry monotone voice as if the words had been recited. “They all have a price.” He lit his cigarette and shivered slightly as a minimal warmth overtook his chilled skin.

Lawrence shifted in his seat so that he could rest his back against the wall while resting his arm over the chair’s back. He looked out to raindrops streaming down the side of the window and thought about the depressing clouds blanketing the people below. A sense of carelessness and ignorance would fall upon them; make them realize that like the rain this misery was temporary. They did all have a price: they bought happiness through a simple fantasy, the fantasy that tomorrow would be better.

Lawrence smoked with little recognition to Frank. His mind filled with a curiosity for how his counterpart functioned against such grave injustice, for how he didn't seem to feel any regret or grief for the sins he had committed. Perhaps the future was filled with those like Mark, who wished to deny God at any opportunity in an effort to seem powerful. Or perhaps the angels of the street, all wearing red, would someday remind men like Frank and Mark the meaning of true justice.

"I'd be careful if I were you. Shot one of our officers in the leg – nearly had to amputate the damn thing," said Frank.

"Dean doesn't care how they're dealt with," said Lawrence. He looked about his apartment at the scattered socks, shirts, and newspapers. It seemed to be a reflection of his mind: unorganized and chaotic. For some reason, this regular image showered him in comfort.

Lawrence believed that if he said the hopeful words out loud, he would somehow feel better, but they simply rang in his ears like dull bells. He looked again to Frank, the man which he had always prided himself as not being. The way he sipped casually on his drink and let the smoke curl back into his nostrils gave an air of calmness. Did he sit there free and unguarded, away from the stress of his sins breaking down upon him, or did he suffer just the same with the hiddenness of a different degree?

In examining this distressful possibility, he clung to Joe's cross in his pocket. He had taken it from Mark who planned to "trade it with a stupid Christian for a drink," a comment that earned a swift punch to the gut from Garret who had already grown tired of him. In removing the icon and looking at it in his hand, he first noticed how scarred his hands appeared against the sharp image.

“Three shootings in the last month – something tells me this is just the beginning. Besides they never stop when they should.” Frank twirled the cigarette in his finger. “People like to think they’re untouchable.”

Lawrence ignored him becoming absorbed in the many features of the metallic figure. The light blue beads were more vibrant in the soft warm light of his apartment and the reflective silver finish seemed to create its own illumination. However, his greatest focus was on the face on the cross. He found it appropriate that Jesus’ face was looking upon him in a sort of sad judging manner, as if asking why he had taken away a member of his herd. Lawrence thought killing Joe himself would induce some sort of closure, but it served only to provoke him more, to remind him of the many sins he had committed.

“What’s that?” asked Frank looking curiously towards the palm of Lawrence’s hand. The cross glinted in the light as he returned it to his pocket. Once again, their cold glassy eyes met and Lawrence looked for some clue that the two of them weren’t the same.

“You believe in God, Frank?” Lawrence asked amidst his turbulent thoughts.

Frank continued to exhibit the same disinterested expression as before. There was no visible surprise in the features of his round face. Rather, he stared at his glass intently and let out his answer with a sense of dryness. “Yes, I suppose I should,” mumbled Frank as he lifted a match up to his cigarette.

“Should?” inquired Lawrence further. He inhaled smoke again in an attempt to calm himself.

Frank answered, "It's somethin' a man ought to believe in, and says he does every time he's asked."

Lawrence leaned back in his chair and pressed on. His voice rose slightly. "So, do *you*?"

"I don't know – it depends on the... circumstances if you will. A man will cry to God in the worst times, but forget to even acknowledge him when things are good," clarified Frank before taking another puff of smoke.

Unsatisfied with the answer, Lawrence paused for a moment before speaking again. "And you're okay with that?"

"What do you mean?" asked Frank.

"I mean are you okay living life not knowing what to believe?" responded Lawrence before scratching at the wrinkles on his forehead.

Frank rubbed his chin for a moment. The musky smoke curled around the contours of his face like some sort of serpent. "I believe in whatever will pay me the most," he responded coldly.

Lawrence looked past the smoke screen at Frank's rough face and noted every single cut, scratch, and scar. These surface marks buried the same tired face that everyone else wore. Whether Frank knew it or not, he was hiding from the results of his consequences.

Frank tossed his cigarette into the dirty glass and swirled it with his index finger. The ashy mix turned a darker shade and Lawrence watched in annoyance. "We all have principles," said Frank. "But they usually get in the way of living life."

"So you just do whatever you want?" asked Lawrence.

“I didn’t say that. I’m talkin’ about these damn people giving up life for what they believe.” He took another long drag of smoke. “Think about it. What difference is it going to make when we’re buried? Who’s gonna care that you followed through with what you thought till the end?”

Lawrence looked on as Frank let the words fall plainly upon the chipped kitchen tiles. “Don’t you feel shame in giving up?”

“No shame in quittin’,” Frank said taking note of Lawrence’s discomfort.

Lawrence thought about the simplicity in the solution to his problems: just give up. Just give it all up and leave this world that caused him so much misery, a sort of unfeasible fantasy. He knew quite well that once you joined the family it was nearly impossible to get out. It wasn’t that the boss stopped you from leaving; it was trying to forget the dark shards of truth in every joyous moment you saw.

Lawrence first joined the family because there was a sense of nobility to it, a certain justice in balancing the power of the streets. This nobility developed into a sort of realization that the syndicate of crime was an evil inevitability. Lawrence saw a sense of balance in all of it, the sheer force of violence able to touch even the greatest men. He was a dark saint, violently removing the stains of dishonorable men, a calling card that kept his world alive.

He looked to Frank and the similarities between the two that he had feared earlier started begun to fade, their individual scars exhibiting different windows to their souls. Where Lawrence saw life as a journey of redemption, Frank saw it as a game where everyone else was the competition. It was the great wedge of honor that would divide them.

Lawrence looked at the manila envelope on the table and let a slight frown fall over his face. More than mere sheets of paper, the folder represented the haunting reality that had to fulfill his contract for the good of society. He clung to the cold twisted logic with a sense of disappointment and shame, a logic from which escape seemed impossible. “You know what Frank, sometimes there is,” Lawrence said separating himself from his counterpart. “Sometimes there just is.”

“Why all the questions?” asked Frank.

“Just thoughts passing by,” Lawrence said casually, “nothin’ more than mere thoughts.” He took a deep breath before smoking again. A cooling sensation struck the back of his head as he observed the amorphous stains that marked the ceiling. Brown around their edges, a creamy shade of white on the inside, and most important to Lawrence, they never change.

Frank checked a watch hidden under the sleeve of his shirt. He put the cigarette butt in his glass and returned the police badge that had been lying on the table to his front pocket. “What are you going to do?” he asked despite already knowing the answer.

“Give them a chance, and if they don’t take it then I’m left with no other option,” said Lawrence with the sort of precision that Garret usually exhibited.

“When you do find them, try not to leave a mess. It means more paperwork for me,” he said whilst standing from his chair. His suit jacket was small causing the dark blue material to grip on his shoulders. “Albert’s address is in that folder. You’ll probably want to start there.”

Frank paused for a moment before concluding the conversation. “Thanks for the drink.”

“More work to do officer?” Lawrence said somewhat mockingly swirling the liquid in his glass.

“It’s America, there’s always more work,” responded Frank.

The musty odor dissipated as Frank left the room and was replaced by the moldy scent of water damage. With a slam of the weakly hinged wooden door, Frank left the apartment to collect money from a few other men in town, mostly collecting bribes to keep the police from disrupting criminal activity. Lawrence leaned back into his seat without bothering to lock the door.

He breathed deeply, happy that he was finally alone and threw Joe’s rosary onto the table, now cluttered with old drinks and cigarette butts. Lawrence proceeded to pick up Frank’s glass and pour the mixture into a nearby trash can. After wiping down the table with an old dish rag, he rinsed the glasses and placed them on the counter to dry. Such was his evening routine: gather information about the next task and clean up the mess. He felt his spare time was consumed by conversations revolving around new distribution routes and how to keep police from disrupting them.

This lonely existence was lessened through the protégées he was responsible for. Despite their usual disrespect, they did provide a sense of importance to Lawrence as he found himself teaching youngsters how to survive on the streets as he did. He had his place as an element to the future, as a criminal beacon for others to follow.

In an effort to establish a certain normalcy to the night’s events, he scoured the refrigerator for some leftover food and attempted to finish reading the rest of a book he had started. However, with a still conflicted mind he found himself caring little about fictional

exploits or far away worlds. His thoughts returned to the disturbed image of a dead man in a junkyard and the woman in the street. Leaving and never coming back sounded even more appealing. He dreamt of freedom, something he grasped at, but no longer felt inclined to believe.

He closed his eyes and slept, dreaming about his own path to the city nearly twenty-five years ago, about his mentor McClellan, called such because he was popular among his men like the civil war general. The words still hung there in his dreamlike state: *It may not look like it, but this city here is a battlefield, and we're the soldiers.* They were all stuck in the grips of a capitalist snake; they all knew it well.

He dreamt of people he no longer recognized as hard working and a profitable machine crashing in a tremendous meltdown. The faith of that machine had died and this world of belief was fading into obscurity.

Others walking by his apartment door could hear the loud snoring. However, Lawrence's noisy snores disguised an inner torment. His unconscious mind gripped the realities of his guilt and these dreams turned into frightening nightmares. He would grab at the side of the couch as the angst rose and he was brought into a world of darkness. The gunshots echoed around him as he became haunted by the faceless demons of death.

Chapter 3: Paranoia and Power

West Range Avenue was the road of wandering drunks, a street home to a wide variety of speakeasies and former saloons that claimed to serve food in lieu of alcoholic refreshments. The Blind Pig, Sam's Treehouse, and the Jester's Court were just a few of the locations that stood against the powerless edict of prohibition. Rather than close shop, they simply converted their operations to a slurry of illegal activities besides bootlegging alcohol. Fearing the hands of the federal government, some of these locations moved into the realms of organized crime and thus fell under the family's umbrella. Few of them cared about the honor or power associated with such an organization. Rather, they saw the dollar signs and acted out of desperation to keep business afloat.

Lawrence drove along the street in the same car from a few days ago, the one that had transported the doomed Joe to his final resting place. Every now and then, his glance caught the stumbling individual or a small group of partygoers chatting incessantly about which establishment served better drinks. It was a strange sight against a seemingly dead backdrop of the occasionally boarded building and old mural advertisements. However, a trained eye would recognize the steady flow of people traversing down a set of steps to the lower levels that would hold the illegal bars below. Most of them had large wooden doors guarding their entrances, some metal for those cautionary types. These raids did little to stop the flow of alcohol. As the agents entered, the patrons and workers would simply exit through a cellar door out to freedom.

Garret leafed through a few documents from the police report whilst smoking a cigarette. He carelessly let the ash fall upon the lead pencil marks that graced the page. With the swift movement of his hand, he brushed aside the ashy remnants leaving behind a light black smudge

upon the page. Garret's eyes wandered from just below the brim of his black fedora as he observed the varied collection of cars that populated the sides of the road.

The stench of exhaust seemed fitting to the images of despair outside. Passing faces dimly lit by street lamps walked endlessly into the night trying to remember what went wrong and who was to blame. To Garret, the Depression added little to measurable amount of tired fools out on the street.

The youthful Mark hadn't experienced the collection of misery that stood before him. For the entirety of his life, he had heard stories of this notorious road. He always heard how you either went there to drink your life away, or take care of business. In seeing all the images of brokenness, he saw the frightening image of what could have been; some of them looked nearly the same. To avoid these realizations, he wiped away at rusty stains of blood that had congealed on his switchblade.

Lawrence noticed these brief glances in his rear view mirror, coupled with the youngster's heavy breathing and the nervously tapping foot. Lawrence wasn't surprised, as all new recruits found themselves looking at another version of themselves.

"Enjoying the view kid?" asked Lawrence.

"I heard about this place and now I see why everyone called it a piece of shit," Mark responded.

"It ain't so bad," Garret interjected between the puffs of his cigarette. "Lots of booze to help a man forget even the worst troubles, and we rake in the profits."

"Capitalism at its finest," added Lawrence.

“I’ve never seen so many drunk fools in my life. They all pay up?” asked Mark.

“Some of them have the cash on hand. Others that don’t got any usually can pay through some sort of favor,” said Garret.

“What’s the use of favors – can’t use favors to get yourself a girl,” said Garret.

Lawrence stepped upon the brakes and let the car come to a steady, but squeaking halt. The fading light of the traffic signal flickered weakly against the blackened sky. “Favors can get you a lot more in the long run. Cops, politicians, judges all bought with a few flicks of the wrist,” Lawrence said.

“Just make them pay up both ways. Consider the favor an additional interest rate for the trouble of keeping their tabs open,” said Mark with a slight smirk.

Garret and Lawrence looked at each other before continuing their conversation. “Was your daddy a businessman?” asked Garret.

“He was a salesman for Ford,” responded Mark. “What’s it to you?”

“You can always tell when someone’s father’s makes a livin’ off of selling. His child carries the same business savvy,” said Lawrence.

“That’s the world we live in – a world where you bleed a man for whatever he’s worth,” said Mark.

Lawrence and Garret both giggled at Mark’s enthusiasm for exploitation. Mark threw his knife aside and looked ahead to the cracking asphalt below. “Demanding someone to pay extra is

like holding a knife to his throat. He won't do anything. He'll just sit there afraid, unsure what to do, and promise you anything," said Lawrence.

"After that you'll never hear from him again, or you start a war you never wanted," added Garret. He took another drag and let the smoke curl around his vibrant red lips.

"If you got the power, why not use it?" asked Mark trying to poke holes in their logic.

"Out here kid, it's a delicate balancing act. You keep the grip tight enough so they can breathe, but not enough to kill em'," said Lawrence.

"You guys got to think like us younger folks, takin' advantage of a situation when we see it," said Mark.

Lawrence started to become agitated and raised his voice. "You know nothing about power. You may think you do, but you don't."

"Why the hell do you get it so well?" asked Mark somewhat mockingly.

Lawrence looked to Garret, but found that he was engrossed in fixing his tie so that it sat evenly across his white shirt while covering the large yellow stain that sat amongst the top button. Lawrence sighed deeply and continued his argument. "You have no respect for power, its ability to change even the most humble men." He paused for a moment and thought about Dean before he controlled the family. "You think yourself a master of your own fate. You believe you have the power to control your world by controlling others – by eliminating all those frightening and weaker unknowns."

Lawrence slowed down the speed of the vehicle with the customary squeaking of aging brake pads. With a sound of moving mechanical components, he moved his hands over the

smooth black knob of the gear shaft and parked the vehicle. He turned around to meet Mark's angry and icy eyes that told a more complicated story. Lawrence's crackling voice eventually gave way to a steady monotone discussion.

"The truth is you'll never control the world, no matter what you do. You'll never eliminate those that remind you of your turbulent past and at some point in your life, you'll simply face the fact that we all suffer from the denial of who we really are and what we've done with ourselves." Lawrence paused to light a cigarette and place it in his pursed lips. "Come to terms with that fact, and you'll truly know power," he finished with the cigarette wavering in his mouth.

Mark simply continued to stare forward past Lawrence's truthful gaze as he refused to believe that power was so complicated, that it was more than the exertion of mere force. Someday perhaps Mark would come to grips with his position as a moderator in this great struggle.

"Come on kid, time to do our duty," Garret said throwing the file folder onto the floor of the passenger seat. Upon exiting the vehicle, he lifted his arms in an outward stretch to the cloudy night sky and let his mind fall into the natural rhythm he had become accustomed to before starting a job.

Mark and Lawrence exited the car and walked up onto the risen sidewalk, now cracked and filled with rivers of water from the rainfall earlier that day. The street remained eerily quiet save for the few people that walked by with heavy footsteps and the cheers from the occasional opened doors of squalid speakeasies.

"If you want to learn kid, let Garret and I do the talking," said Lawrence.

“You haven’t even told me what we’re doing here,” said Mark in a cool tone.

Lawrence answered, “We’re investigatin’ leads about stolen product – believe the owner might give us a lead.”

They stood there before the building of old bricks and wood paneling, slightly newer than the others on the ivory laid complex. A large wooden sign hung overhead barely hinged by two rusting chains. The *ALBERT’S* on the old sign had started to peel away revealing a base layer of rotting wood below.

The three stood there for a moment. Mark, unsure what to expect, simply stood there annoyed kicking at the long jet black laces of his dirty shoes. He removed his hat and brushed the thin layer of sweat that had gathered on his forehead. With his hat returned to his scalp, an uninterested expression flooded his face. It looked like that of a young child bored at church.

“We gonna do this?” asked Mark.

Lawrence looked up from his feet and fixated on those eyes of blissful ignorance and misunderstanding. He would have to learn that these jobs weren’t as simple as the robberies and murders he had committed before. In this world, he would have to forget about himself and work towards a greater goal.

The family would demand the simplicity of following without question, the ability to think of the family first. It would prove a difficult trial for anyone, especially the power fixated Mark. He would either be used for his services or end up dead for disloyalty. Lawrence never had to deliver the second option, and he hoped it would never come to that.

Lawrence turned away from Mark and walked towards the heavy wooden door. Mark and Garret followed with the same slow steps to the concrete doorstep. Lawrence grabbed the dull metal handle and let a cold chill shoot up his arm, finally dissipating with a shallow breath against the cold night air. Just before opening the door, Lawrence came to the realization that this might be the last chance for Mark to escape his fate. Thus, he turned around and gave Mark one last chance to run from the reality he didn't yet know.

"You ready kid? Cause with every job, you'll have trouble going back," said Lawrence candidly while hiding beneath the brim of his hat.

Mark responded, "Show me."

Lawrence looked towards Garret who nodded his head slightly. Both knew there was no turning back, that this night would define him as a member of the family for life. "Let's get this done," Lawrence said opening the door slowly to the brightly lit room.

They were met with a rather clean and contrasting image to the outside world from which they had just left. Smooth wooden floorboards differed dramatically from the nearly warped wood siding on the building outside. Shelves covered with an array of items for sale marked the walls. In one section sat pristine jars containing pieces of candy, while another section sold the old issues of magazines. Wool coats and shirts hanged from the jam of the store window preventing any glance to the outside. A large wooden case placed strategically in the middle of the shop contained several items including a gold watch, a music box, some old collars, and an archaic silver medal. The few overhead cast a strange glow upon the relics within the room almost as if they were museum treasures. Such was the image of Albert's pawn shop: an over-glorified grouping of randomness situated within a depressing street of drunks.

All three stood for a moment taking in the grandeur displays of half-broken items. They eyed a young clerk behind the back counter engrossed in a book. They approached the wide wooden structure and rang the small metallic bell. The young man jumped up from his seat noticeably shocked and surprised to see someone in the shop so late at night. He looked to be a man of no more than twenty with a prominent chin and short sandy hair. With the nervous suspicion of a man feeling he is about to be robbed, he timidly inquired of their presence.

“Greetings gentlemen” He cleared his throat. “What brings you gentlemen here so late at night?” he asked quietly.

“We’re looking for Albert McMillan,” said Garret. “May we speak to him?”

The young man rubbed his hands together cautiously. “May I inquire as to why?” he asked.

“We have some business to discuss with him,” said Lawrence.

In an effort to find something to do, Mark removed a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He fumbled with a match as he tried to light it. The man at the counter noticed and gave a look of disapproval before speaking. “No... no smoking please, store policy.”

An irritated Mark shot back a menacing glance towards the shopkeeper letting the cigarette burn carefully in between his fingers. Lawrence turned his head towards the newcomer. “His shop, let’s not make this an issue Mark.”

Mark furrowed his brows in anger and let the barely burnt cigarette fall to the clean floor. He lifted his foot intent on crushing small bits of tobacco in between the floorboards, but was stopped by Garret who pushed down the risen leg whilst shaking his head at the youngster.

“Forgive us, sir. He has yet to learn some of those proper mannerisms the city’s agreed to,” said Lawrence trying to ease the man’s sense of fear.

“No sir, no need to apologize, I don’t have a problem with smoking but what the man upstairs says, goes,” he said in the more reassuring tone of acceptance.

Lawrence leaned relaxingly on the counter. The cuffs of his suit jacket started to crinkle under the stress of his weight. “Listen, tell your boss that the men from Niagara are here. He’ll understand.”

The young man paused for a moment and smoothed out his white apron before answering. “Ok... just give me a minute.”

“Thank you,” finished Lawrence standing back up.

“The men from Niagara?” asked Mark. “What the hell is that?”

Garret removed his hat and scratched at his brown hair allowing his suit jacket to open and nearly expose the handgun hidden in the holster beneath. “An easy trick to talk to the individuals that are... scarce,” he said.

Mark looked back to Garret with the same menacing expression from earlier. “What does that even – ”

“Shush,” said Lawrence who heard footsteps and the approaching voice of two men.

From the door behind the counter that the young men had entered previous, two men now reappeared. One was the same young man and the other looked similar to the Albert in the photo, save for a new haircut and a heavier beard now covering his face. His expression followed a

similar pattern to the young shopkeeper: one of suspicion and doubt over the gentlemen before him. He turned to the younger man from earlier.

“Thank you Michael. You may end your shift thirty minutes early today. I have some things to discuss with my colleagues,” said Albert.

Michael grabbed his book and jacket from the floor. He quickly buttoned up and exited through the front not giving notice to Mark’s continually angry stare. With a final address to his employer, Michael shouted from the door. “See you tomorrow sir!”

Albert waved a casual goodbye to the young employee exposing a long red scare that ran along his hand coupled with a splotchy red burn mark. Both Lawrence and Garret took note of these details, but Mark cared little in noticing such minor things. “I don’t recognize any of you, so how can I know you’re really with them? How do I know you guys aren’t just screwing with me?” Albert asked resting his arms upon the counter.

“You got us Albert. We weren’t sent by them,” said Lawrence.

“We’re here about another issue,” added Garret.

Albert disappeared for a moment under the counter appearing to grab something. When he returned back up, he carefully placed a hunting shotgun onto the counter with a package of slugs. With careful calculated precision, he loaded a round into each chamber of the gun and turned off the safety. A tense Mark looked on in disbelief and carefully fumbled the trigger of his handgun. But Lawrence and Garret did nothing, said nothing. Completely relaxed, they stood as Albert proudly displayed the loaded ten gauge upon the table.

“I assume all of you have weapons on you. You wouldn’t be quite that stupid unless you’re thinking of robbing the place. If that’s the case, I’ll give you one last chance to leave,” he said clenching his fists under the table.

“Didn’t know the Irish were this aggressive,” snickered Mark.

Lawrence and Garret continued in their quest. “Killing a member of the family certainly wouldn’t look good for you, now would it Mr. Mcmillan?” said Garret.

“Why should I trust whatever you say?” asked Albert aggressively.

“Trying to keep the issue contained, unless you’d like more disturbance to your little shop here,” Lawrence said. He casually walked over to the nearby shelf and started to fumble about with the items. An old pocket watch clicked loudly as he opened and closed the rusty cover that protected the fragile glass covering. “Besides, who else would know that code?”

“I don’t care. I want to talk to your boss,” Albert said.

Lawrence let the pocket watch close for one final time before placing it back upon the shelf. He rubbed his fingers together trying to remove the thin layer of grime he had collected. “Don’t be stupid.” He walked back over to the counter next to Garret who leaned against the wall adjacent. “We’re simply doing our jobs – looking into leads about some fools that’ve been stealing whiskey off the docks.”

Albert’s eyes widened slightly and he looked down to his shotgun with a fearful glance. Lawrence noticed this and carefully caressed the trigger of his handgun ready to take action if necessary. Lawrence wasn’t sure if this was the look of guilt or simply the mark of fearful suspicion. The next few minutes would determine which of these proved to be true.

He stared blankly into Lawrence's eyes. "And you think I'm to blame, is that it? Just here to accuse me?"

Garret spoke from the wall. "We're not accusing anyone. We're simply asking questions and trying to track them down." He looked over to Mark wondering if he would make some obnoxious comment, but found that he appeared to be listening intently to the conversation with a slight lean forward and eyes following each man that spoke.

"This strip is close to the area where the thefts have been happening Albert, and we know you don't like inexperienced thugs going around your shop," said Lawrence trying to angle his speech so it wasn't accusing Albert.

"There's nothing to like bout any of you, no matter the inexperience. You're all the same: demanding money from businesses for *protection*. It's just another way of owning the city, and you're pissed I'm not paying as much as the rest," shot back Albert in a hurry.

"That's something for Dean to be concerned with, not me. I'm just here to cover the bases, make sure no stone's left unturned." Lawrence paused to yawn. "You following me?"

"I'm not letting you guys pillage my goddamn store," he said forcefully.

"Just let us have a quick walkthrough of the place so we can tell the boss we looked. Can you give us that much?" asked Garret.

"No! You expect me just to let you just waltz around here like some fucking policeman. You're out of your god damn mind," answered Albert.

"Here's the thing Albert." Lawrence placed his hands flat upon the rough wooden counter letting the sharp pain of a splinter enter into the rough palms of his hand. His eyes pierced past

Albert's rough appearance and stabbed at his heavy soul. "You're going to let us look, unless you'd rather have a more violent end to your business involving a hell of a lot more guns and paperwork."

"Are you threatening me?" Albert spat back taking hold of his shotgun.

"Careful," shot out Mark, "It's three against one and you only got two slugs."

Each of them ignored Mark's comments still determined for a more peaceful approach, Garret out of the ease peacefulness brought whereas Lawrence acted out of moral obligation. Garret continued to stand there against the wall grinding away at his back molars in a state of unconscious nervousness. With a straightened stance and serious expression, he approached Albert intent on diffusing the situation.

"Relax, like my associate here said, we simply making sure we cover all grounds. If you let us look around, we won't do nothing that'll harm your store," Garret said before looking into Albert's eyes. "Unless you got something to hide that is."

"I've got nothing to hide," he responded with the shotgun still lying heavily upon his hands. The barrel wavered slightly as his body trembled displaying his clear sense of anxiety at the situation.

"Then let us make it worth your while," said Garret. He signaled to Mark at which point the youngster removed a hundred dollar bill from his pocket and handed it to Garret. Garret slammed the money down upon the scratched surface with a loud thud and removed his hand exposing the torn edges of the green bill.

Lawrence scratched again at his head allowing a strand of greying hair fall carelessly to the ground. “A hundred dollars for a ten minute search, can you handle that?” said Lawrence.

A silence fell amongst the group as Albert continued to eye them suspiciously. Lawrence made on final addendum. “And you can *supervise* us in the search.”

Albert responded, “And if I say no, then what? You gonna use force?”

“No my man,” said Mark, “You’re just increasing your risk of an unfortunate accident.”

“We may also be forced to come back with more men.” Albert’s vengeful gaze fell upon Lawrence’s chapped lips as the words were absorbed into his psyche. “Just think about that: days of a closed shop for an intensive screening of this location. This is your easier way out. Be smart about this and give us some trust.”

Albert’s beard hairs seemed to vibrate against his reddened face as they swayed slightly against the humid air of the store. Pits of sweat started to appear around the seams under his arms and darkened the light blue shade of his dress shirt. His glance shifted amongst between the men standing before him, but seemed fixated on Mark who still rested his hand upon the gun hidden beneath his suit coat.

“I trust few people and you aren’t among them,” said Albert. He proceeded to lower his shotgun back onto the counter in front of his tormentors. “But it looks like I don’t have much of a choice.”

“Good man,” said Lawrence.

“Under one condition,” added Albert with inflexion. “You sir,” he said pointing to Lawrence. “What’s your name?”

“Lawrence sir,” he responded.

“You alone can search my store under my strict supervision,” finished Albert. “Not these two. Your friend there has a point: three against one doesn’t make for good odds.”

Lawrence looked to Mark and Garret. He wasn’t concerned about his own safety for he had far more experience in dealing with a man hand-to-hand. Even with age difference considered, he felt confident in his ability to subdue Albert, especially when he had a weapon on hand.

Garret turned to Mark. “Come on kid.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Mark said. “We could just blow out his brains right – ”

“Shut your goddamn mouth,” scolded Lawrence interrupting him. “I’ll make the sweep and see you in a little bit.”

Garret took hold of Mark’s arm attempting to lead him out of the store, but Mark pushed it away. He angrily turned around and walked out on his own. Mark talked under his breath talking about the waste of time, how talking was useless when force could be used. Lawrence sympathized with the young man, knew that one of the most difficult parts of handling power was when to use it properly.

Garret walked out of the door and shut it at which point Albert addressed Lawrence. “Lock the door.”

Lawrence did as told and locked the door with a loud click. From behind his head, he heard the faint footsteps following. Upon turning around, Lawrence was met with the barrel of Albert’s shotgun pointed at his eye so he could see down the rusted tube, the distinct scent of

lead rising from within. Lawrence remained outwardly calm and cautious under this pressure that would have made other men react instantly.

“Just so we’re clear about who’s in control here,” said Albert lowering the shotgun to his hip. To Lawrence, Albert looked like a man crazed with endless suspicion of the world around him, like the men on street corners that preached the end of civilization near the end of the big crash.

Lawrence nodded in agreement. With the gun casually rested near his hip, Albert accompanied Lawrence as he walked across the room. “Where do we start?” Lawrence asked.

“Surprise me,” said Albert with a sense of amusement.

“You’re the boss,” answered Lawrence without turning around to Albert.

About five minutes of this tense tour commenced, one man cautiously holding a gun while the other marched forward taking note on any strange details. Lawrence searched the first floor carefully with an effort to scan with his eyes only as much as possible for he didn’t want to cause further unease in his guest. He paid careful attention to any spots that may be good for hiding loose bottles of liquor. Every wooden break on the bookshelf and every shred of strange light he investigated.

A brief sweep of the main floor yielded little results spare a few alcohol bottles filled with sand to create a paper weight. Everything was indicative of your typical pawn shop selling wares that seemed rather shifty, but in no way connected to illegal activity. In some instances, he’d feel along wood floorboards or the walls. When asked what he was doing by Albert, Lawrence would answer, “Just looking around. No different from any other place.” In reality, a

search at another location wouldn't be so thorough, but Albert's suspicion as the culprit required greater care than a typical search.

They walked up a spiral metal staircase behind the counter. Its cold black appearance blended in well against the dark of the corridor. Albert reached for a string hanging from the ceiling and pulled on it barely illuminating the steps on which they walked with a singular flickering incandescent bulb above. Lawrence continued to feel like he was being guided to a cell, something he had experienced briefly in his youth for repeated instances of petty theft and vandalism.

The blackened steps lead to a layout far smaller than the main floor. He was met by a short corridor painted a dark shade of orange and still smelling of wet paint. A collection of photos were pressed against spots on the wall. Pressing his hands against the thick wooden frames, he pushed aside the photos to expose the wall behind them and found nothing out of the ordinary, nothing hidden, nothing extraordinary.

"Doing some remodeling?" asked Lawrence with a quick smile towards Albert. Albert didn't react. He only stood there clutching the gun tighter to his hip. "What's in here?" asked Lawrence approaching the cumbersome door at the end of the hallway.

"That's my office," said Albert. "Well come on, let's get this done with."

Lawrence gripped the loose doorknob and jiggled at it in an attempt to open the door. Finally it gave way as Lawrence leaned his full weight against the flimsy wooden obstacle. He was met by a surprisingly spacious room with an open window in the far corner. A short wooden desk and chair sat in the far corner of the room next to a stack of various cardboard boxes. The

dirty floor was littered with bits of trash and paper, focusing the eye away from the many gouges carved into the floor from the moving of furniture.

Lawrence looked back to his guard who seemed more at ease since the beginning of his search. His vibrating arms gave way to a greater sense of calm and his broad shoulders lay easily at his sides. Although his grip on his the shotgun was still firm, it appeared in a more cautionary fashion rather than grounded on modes of suspicion. Lawrence hoped he could use this newfound sense to his advantage, try and get away with looking closer for further clues.

Lawrence peered about the collection of documents that were piled upon his desk not noticing anything of interest. With a keen eye, he leaned down and studied the top few papers; most of them were revealed to be old receipts from the store. However, after further examination a few captured his curiosity. They noted the sale of various “crates” to an individual referred to only as Mr. Fletcher.

With an increased suspicion Lawrence inquired about the man. “Who’s Fletcher?”

“A customer,” said Albert in a weak voice. His gaze danced away from Lawrence before he continued with a resurged annoyance. “What’s it to you?”

“Says here you sold him some crates.” He approached Albert who continued to avoid direct eye contact. “Care to explain.”

“What’s there to explain? I sell him some... miscellaneous items.” His hands started to shake slightly again.

Lawrence gave a devilish smile. “That’s what you call it.” He placed the receipt back upon the stack of papers.

“We done yet?” Albert inquired.

“Just got to check the basement Mr. McMillen,” responded Lawrence.

A pushy Albert guided his captor down the spiral staircase to the basement. The brick walls were covered in a melancholy coat of grey, which added to the depressing cobwebs littering the corners. A small window sill the far corner lit the room slightly in a narrow flood of radiance, but the darkness continued to shroud most detail. Albert amusingly watched as Lawrence fumbled about for a light switch. His hands followed the walls coating his palms in a thin layer of grimy dust. When he finally succeeded in finding the cold metal panel he grabbed at the switch revealing the basement’s appearance under a flickering bulb that fully came to illuminating life a few seconds later.

Boxes were stacked along the walls in towers of a few feet. They were marked in dark black with a variety of dates; March 1926, September 1924, and June 1920 boldly presented themselves to any visitor. Putrid dust collected around these edges of decaying cardboard giving off a foul scent in the process. Lawrence thought of this basement as typical to a house of this age: a sort of depressing notion emanating from the smells and colors of an older decade.

However, Lawrence’s eyes widened as he turned his head slightly right to observe the final wall of the room. Rather than finding a similar collection of boxes and smells, he was met by a proud wall of books neatly lined up upon pristine wooden shelves. The items themselves seemed to produce their own glow of warmth, diverging from the pattern of weak illumination that seemed to take hold on the rest of the house. Despite being covered in the same layer of dust that populated the rest of the basement, they looked clean to the outward eye. This thin layer was barely recognizable against the bright bindings and letters that followed along the books’ spines.

In a sort of trance, he was brought closer to this large wall of knowledge and impressed by it. Lawrence had read a great deal in his youth as a sort of escape from the realities of a broken home; that was before he took to the road. Such a clean and admired collection of texts brought warmth to his heart and returned him back to one of the few peaceful moments that marked his childhood years.

In approaching the texts he began to read the titles silently to himself. The Iliad, Plato's Republic, The Jungle, and a copy of the Bible caught his attention. "You're an avid reader I see," he said.

"Not anymore," Albert responded. "Haven't touched those in years."

"Why not?" said Lawrence.

"Why does it matter to you?" asked an aggressive Albert.

"Just wondering," said Lawrence.

Albert attempted to answer the question. "Those are from when I was young and stupid, when I thought the random shit in those actually made a difference."

Lawrence's hand followed along the row of books that were level with his head. Shakespeare, Dickens, and Wilde were just a few of the other authors he had on hand. He hoped when he had a better grasp upon the world of books, he would read all of these men with the intense joy of an imagination in which he could escape to. Unfortunately, Lawrence gave up on that idea the day he left home. Deciding that a life of action rather than thought would teach him better, he threw whatever library books he still had in the trash. They were all simple tales meant for children, yet Lawrence still felt some sort of guilt for that youthful moment when he gave up

upon a life of thought and turned instead to crime. He frowned remembering these things as he started to run his finger down the second row.

“You should. You could learn a lot,” said Lawrence.

Albert grunted loudly. “What are you? A teacher.”

“Not that sort of teacher, no,” Lawrence finished.

His index finger collected bits of grime that had encapsulated the books due to years of non-use. The thin layer started to gather upon his finger as a gray smudge of dirt. The pristine image of the shelf of many books began to dissipate upon the realization that this was a symbol of neglect. His abandoned books elaborated to a different man than the one holding a gun. He concluded that a younger Albert could believe in a world outside of his own, a land of other possibilities. However, reality forced him to submit and endorse a cruel world where new ideals seemed pointless when faced against the checks of power from those around him.

In the midst of this thought, Lawrence abruptly stopped his finger. The same layer of coated dirt wasn't present on one book – the bible. In fact, a closer inspection revealed an intricate pattern of dust upon the shelf, suggesting that this book had been moved many times before. This fact struck Lawrence as strange for why would Albert, the man disillusioned with these tales, remove this book from the shelf?

“You’ve been reading the bible I see,” Lawrence said removing the few copies from the shelf feigning some interest in the titles.

Albert’s pupils widened and he rushed forward to try and prevent Lawrence from displacing them. “Stop,” he shouted. However it was to no avail; the book already lay in

Lawrence's hands and exposed a small box hidden behind them. Lawrence eyes with it with curiosity before placing the three books upon the ground. As Lawrence started to stretch his arm towards the box, the barrel of the shotgun was pushed into his side.

"What the hell you think you're doin'?" asked Albert pushing the gun firmly against Lawrence's delicate ribs.

"I'm conducting my search, and I believe you're not letting me do my job," answered Lawrence forcefully.

"I think you've done enough disrupting for one day," said Albert angrily.

Lawrence turned around to Albert not forgetting the incriminating evidence that probably lay hidden in that box, something that would connect him to the string of thefts. He stood there staring at Albert and the loaded gun shaking in his hand. "If you have nothing to hide, then you'd let me finish," he said.

"I'm telling you there's nothing else to find. Now tell me, who put you up to this?" asked a furious Albert.

"I've already told you who our associates and I work for sir," he responded coolly.

A paranoid and nervous Albert attempted to frame Lawrence as the villain. "You're a no good thief, a god damn liar. I knew there was something fishy about you and your friends." He wiped away the sweat that was now pouring from his forehead. "Well guess what, you got yourself killed cause of some phony story!"

Lawrence knew Albert to be guilty; his extreme reaction said it all. He was at his last line of defense, an effort to make the situation look like a misunderstanding, a shooting that was

justified by the man thinking he would be robbed. “Relax sir, no need for hostilities,” said Lawrence.

“Don’t say sir one more damn time! I’m close to pullin’ the trigger,” he said.

A certain Lawrence thought for a moment with his back to a wall of books and a paranoid criminal pointing a gun to his head. He realized diplomacy now had fully failed and that forceful action was needed. “You shoot me, and you’re gonna piss off a lot of people.”

Albert pointed the gun to Lawrence’s head. “Why should I care what they think? All of you are pieces of shit. All of you are no good, god damn —”

Lawrence interrupted Albert as he moved with the calculated precision of a seasoned veteran, an advantage he knew he had from the start. He swiftly brushed away the barrel of the gun with his right hand and ducked his head below Albert’s waist. Albert pulled the trigger amidst this movement too late to hit Lawrence. In an explosive release of gaseous heat, the shotgun pellets ripped past the books on the shelf and into the wood backing. The ripped pages flew into the air in a flurry of torn paper that looked like snow. The blast destroyed the horizontal wood panel supporting them and caused them to fall violently to the ground in an upheaval of dust particles.

As soon as Albert’s weapon was pushed aside, Lawrence used the brief opportunity of space to attack his larger opponent. With a fierce kick, Lawrence struck Albert in the crotch, a move that Albert responded to by moving his hands low and grunting in pain. He howled in pain, and Lawrence took this few second gap for a knockout blow. In a flash of black and white, he quickly drew the pistol from his holster and slammed the body of the weapon across Albert’s face.

Albert's face was left with a darkened right eye and a large mark of red upon his cheek. His nose started to bleed profusely and a shallow cut upon his other cheek was revealed. Lawrence's pistol-whip caused him to lose balance slightly as he fell down upon his knees in a state of disorientation. Albert tried to grab at his opponent in a last ditch attempt, but Lawrence had the upper hand of striking first. He easily threw off Albert's hands with his own and returned a punch to the face. Albert fell backwards upon the ground still conscious, but breathing heavily and now bleeding from his mouth as well. With blood soaked lips, he tried to speak.

"Fuck... you," he said gulping down bloody spit.

Lawrence adjusted his clothing and hat, surprised it hadn't fallen off. He shook his fist that was still sore from the force of the punch. He approached Albert with the gun in hand. "I gave you the opportunity to do this the easy way, but you had other ideas Mr. McMillan. Now we get to the truth about our stolen product. Where is it?"

Albert grabbed at his nose feeling the warm blood drip against his fingers and wincing in intense pain. He rightly assumed his nose to be broken from the force of the gun. "I have... nothing... to tell you," he stammered.

"Again refusing the easy option," Lawrence said smiling. Starting to regain his composure, Albert began to stand again. "Have it your way," finished Lawrence.

Before Albert could stand fully again, Lawrence hit the barrel of his gun against Albert's thick scalp. The blow knocked out Albert, and his body fell freely to the ground. In a pile of blood and mucous he lay with his eyes shut. Lawrence moved aside the thick cloth of his suit jacket and replaced his pistol to the holster. Breathing deeply, he shook his head and spoke briefly. "What a shame," he said quietly. "What a shame."

Lawrence's mind returned to the box that was suspiciously placed behind those books. He walked back to the bookshelf intent on studying the box's contents and finding the reason why Albert had acted so violently at its discovery. Luckily, the bullets passed to the left of the box and into the adjacent shelf throwing mix of wooden splinters and torn papers across the room. With a keen interest, he grabbed the tin and pulled the hinged lid exposing its contents.

Within the box were a few thousand dollars rolled up in a wad of bills and kept together with a rubber band. Under these were a number of folded papers. He removed them and carefully inspected the words upon those pale pages. They were receipts detailing the sale of alcohol, but not of the family's stolen whiskey. Rather, they documented the possession and sale of alcohol from gangs across the city. At a second look, the paper's revealed how Albert had been tracking the sales across various territories in an effort to "buy up surplus" from different gangs. This in itself was a dangerous activity, as the gangs of the city kept a strict regulation over their supplies as it entered the city so that the product didn't fall into other hands. However, these notes didn't reveal anything about stealing family whiskey, only information regarding risky business practice that had the potential to get him hurt.

Lawrence sat down on a box and removed his hat annoyed that the evidence wasn't what he had expected. It was possible that there was other information scattered about, but he also accepted the possibility that Albert was simply a shady business man playing many of the gangs controlling the city. Such information was interesting and illuminating, but it wasn't what he needed. He stood up and paced the room thinking of where more concrete evidence might be scratching at his balding hair. He walked over the bookshelf again and wondered if any other information could be hidden behind other books. He hastily tore them off the shelves and threw them down on the ground, but to his disappointment he found nothing.

He sat down again and rubbed his rough chin of greying stubble. His eyes narrowed as he peered along the wall of books, as if they somehow carried the answer to his dilemma. He resolved to gather Garret and Mark, to try and get the information out of Albert by force. He thought for sure they would be able to extract it using Mark's enthusiasm for violence combined with careful interrogation methods.

In raising his head, Lawrence noticed something strange in the hole created by the pellets of the shotgun. The holes created were a dark shade of black, not grey like the rest of the walls in the basement. It appeared as if something else was behind the bookshelf. He felt the tiny holes created and found that the flimsy plywood backing of the shelf was very thin and could be pushed in, as if there was a space behind the shelf.

An excited Lawrence removed a switchblade from his pocket and tried to widen the small holes left by the pellets. He carefully picked away at the flimsy wood until the holes were large enough for his grip to take hold. Knife still in hand, he tugged hard at the thin wood layer until it finally cracked revealing the open space behind it. The small hole, only about as large as his head, was pitch dark save for the small ray of light that could escape from behind his head. He angled his head so that the light could enter the small space as easily as possible.

Upon adjusting his position, Lawrence was able to allow the light to penetrate the darkness and reveal a partial image of an object behind the bookcase. Squinting, he focused until it appeared more clearly to his aging eyes. All of a sudden, a smile broke across his face and he gave an approving nod. A large bottle sparkled in the light, the amber whiskey glowing within.

Chapter 4: The Interrogation

Albert awoke in a daze, hearing the barely audible voices of men around him. Finally, his blurry vision returned to full focus after blinking a few times. He was met by Lawrence sitting casually upon a cardboard box and smoking freely, his plain face hiding a slight happiness. Lawrence's dirty black jacket lay upon the ground in a neat pile capped by the signature fedora, allowing the holstered weapon to be clearly seen against his white shirt.

Albert tried to move his hands quickly in an act of retaliation, but found himself unable to do so, his hands and feet tied in thickly braided black rope. He shook the chair violently with all his weight and with a snarl he licked at his lips and tasted the saltiness of the dried blood below his broken nose. His body shivered as the realization of fear set in; he was trapped and at the mercy of his captors.

Mark and Garret worked diligently behind Albert in a more thorough search. They ripped apart boxes and threw aside old tools in a great upheaval with the singular goal of finding evidence. The loud sound of moving items made Albert shiver, wondering if each movement brought him closer to full-fledged guilt. The movement of old boxes only exasperated the smells of the room.

"What..." Albert coughed up some blood unto the floor before finishing his question. "What are you doing?"

"Finding proof," mumbled Lawrence with the cigarette still between his lips. "Something you weren't going to give us willingly."

“You god damn pieces of shit,” said Albert with eyes ablaze in rage. The red marks upon his right eye and cheek had started to blacken as the colorful bruise began to form. The flow of blood from his nose had congealed around his lips.

“I allowed you to tell the truth.” Lawrence grabbed the cigarette from his lips so he could communicate more clearly. “But your denial forced us to search and thus here we are, at an impasse that must be broken through force if necessary. So I’ll give you one last chance to tell us the truth. How have you been involved with stealing our product?”

Lawrence slowly leaned in for an answer. Albert turned his head away in a fit of fearful silence. He thought of the consequences at hand and how his life was at stake, but Albert refused to back down. His mind adamantly refused to break and he gave a stubborn, yet foolish and dangerous response.

His face turned back to Lawrence who was only a few inches away. Albert’s black eye seemed to reflect light as he struggled to blink back upon Lawrence’s old face. “Go to hell,” Albert said weakly. He swished around the spit in his mouth in an effort to salivate further. When he finally had gathered enough, he shot a stream of bloody saliva onto Lawrence’s cheek.

Lawrence’s serious face remained cold and stoic, only wiping it away when it started to flow down his cheek. “Not the smartest man,” he said giving a devilish smile.

Lawrence stood up grabbed at Albert’s broken nose twisting it slightly. Albert let out a sharp whimper, a noise that caught both Garret and Mark off-guard. They paused their work and watched as a jacketless Lawrence, cigarette dangling from his left hand, approached them. Albert continued to struggle fiercely against the rope, but only succeeded in cutting into his fragile skin further. The trio ignored him as their discussion commenced.

“I assume we’re gonna have to take the answers,” said Garret.

Lawrence took a long drag of smoke and nodded in agreement. Mark smiled revealing the wrinkled corners of his mouth that would become prominent in later years. “I see your diplomacy has failed.”

Lawrence said, “Diplomacy never works with a guilty man.”

“Then why did we waste all that god damn time?” retorted Mark.

Garret responded. “What were we gonna do? Just run in and start shootin’.”

“That ain’t what I’m saying,” said Mark. “I just don’t get why we couldn’t have simply forced our way in and taken what we wanted.”

Lawrence cupped his hand around his lighter as he attempted to reignite his cigarette. His face glowed orange against the small flame. “Like I said earlier kid, you got to work these situations.”

“Yeah, and that worked real well,” said Mark raising his hand up to the half destroyed bookshelf and the books lying upon the ground. “You nearly got yourself killed.”

“You saw the way he was shaking with that gun in hand?” asked Lawrence.

“No, who the hell notices shit like that?” shot back.

“You will if you’re smart,” said Garret.

“You’d be surprised what you can learn by watching,” explained Lawrence.

Mark turned his gaze towards Albert who had since stopped struggling and let his head fall back upon the very top of the chair. He appeared fatigued and finished with his attempts for an escape. "Fine then, tell me about him," said Mark half interested and half wanting to challenge Lawrence's claim.

Lawrence threw what was left of his cigarette upon the ground and crushed it under the weight of his dress shoe. A dark mark of ash contaminated the blotched ground of grey and brown. He looked to Albert and recollected what he had learned from his short time as both an interrogator and prisoner under his roof.

"Well to start, he appeared to be guilty of something from the start. He always tried to avoid direct eye contact. His eyes would widen and his body would shake whenever we were investigating him. Whether this was simple nervousness or an indication of guilt I don't know. However, it does show how he lets fear take hold of him in the moment, that he didn't have the guts to pull the trigger," said Lawrence.

"But he did pull the trigger," added Mark.

"True, but he didn't shoot me when he had the chance." He pointed to the empty bookshelf. "I stood there for a good minute and instead of shooting, he shouted at me, accused me of wrongdoing, called me a criminal. In a moment of desperation, he had to find a reason to kill a man."

He turned directly to Mark and finished his statement. "So here's the point kid. I took that opportunity to act. When he was rationalizing, I was taking action to apprehend him. He pulled the trigger, but only when he felt threatened."

Mark allowed the information to take hold, but Mark had yet to understand that these were men of a structured society, not lonely individuals walking the streets fearing being robbed and beaten. No, these men valued power, and wouldn't respond to violence alone. Their code needed to be compromised; they needed a rational reason to give in.

"Interesting theories," answered Mark honestly who had yet to be fully convinced that these ideas truly represented Albert.

"What did you find exactly that made you look into the bookshelf?" asked Garret.

Lawrence removed the small metal tin from his pocket and brushed it off again. He opened it and handed Garret the folded papers and wad of cash. "This. I found it hidden behind a few books." Garret unfolded the sheets and studied the paper carefully.

"Why were you looking at books?" asked a curious Mark.

"It seemed out of place," responded Lawrence truthfully, but unwilling to share his childhood attraction to the bookcase.

Garret paced about allowing his feet to fall heavily in a cloud of dust. A relaxed yawn indicated his matter-of-fact approach to the situation, almost like it was a daily exercise. His eyes ran along the lines of text on the paper. "He's playing quick and loose."

Garret handed the paper back, but Mark quickly snatched it before Lawrence had the chance to react. His greedy eyes tried to soak up the information.

"How does that help us?" finished Garret turning back to Lawrence.

“It’s not what we’re looking for, but it does provide us with some leverage,” said Lawrence. “And it helps us understand him better.”

“So you called us down here for a little bit of force eh?” Mark rolled up his sleeves revealing a partial tan that faded in color as your eyes followed to the shoulder. He had yet to experience the crackling effects of the sun upon his smooth undamaged skin. “That’s more like it.”

“Hold on kid. I called you guys down to help me with that,” said Lawrence pointing to the hole in the bookcase.

“A secret room?” questioned Garret.

“It would appear so, and it looks like that there are some bottles in there,” said Lawrence.

“Let’s do it then, and find what we need,” said Mark. “So we can shoot this poor bastard.”

“Tone it down. A bullet to the head don’t fix everything boy,” scolded Garret.

“Maybe if you guys actually did things my way, we could get this god damn job a lot damn sooner,” said Mark.

“Step aside you little prick and let the grown-ups deal with it,” responded Garret starting to lose his patience.

Mark clenched his fist as his face started to redden. He wasn’t used to being told what to do and he didn’t take to it kindly. He approached Garret resisting the urge to punch his superior, like any employee who didn’t respect his boss. Garret steadied his stance making sure he would

be able to strike back if anything were to happen. Witnessing this, Lawrence reminded them of the task at hand.

“Knock it off! Both of you! I don’t have the time to deal with this bullshit.” Mark backed down like an injured bear not ready to admit defeat, but not willing to challenge the hunter that had shot him.

“I’m tired of not getting any damn respect,” he mumbled angrily fixing his tie again.

“You got to earn your respect. That’s the way this works, and you start by following the rules. Got it?” asked Lawrence.

Mark placed his hands squarely upon his hip and shook his head disgruntled by his lower status in the family. He addressed his superior again. “Yeah sure, whatever,” he said in a somewhat sarcastic tone.

Garret watched Mark carefully with great distrust. Every new member they had to train seemed more violent and careless than the one before. Perhaps it was Garret’s upbringing in a middle-class world that prevented him from seeing the boy’s perspective, that limited his patience. Garret witnessed the death of principled class something that had seemed to implode since the greed of the 1920s took hold and it fell apart in a dramatic implosion.

“Oh relax Mark,” said Lawrence addressing him by name for the first time. Mark took some notice in the gesture looking into Lawrence’s eyes with a less hateful lens. “You’ll get your respect. It’s all about proving yourself. We all started off where you were. Good thing the only way is up,” Lawrence said recalling his youth.

Albert began to struggle again with fresh vigor. When this proved unsuccessful, he started to shout. "Let me go! Help!"

Interrupted, the group convened upon Albert covering the light that shone in his eye. All of them looked down on their victim with a certain curiosity. As Albert opened his eyes wider, the image of his captors became clear and the same sense of fear heightened. He sweat profusely as he realized each set of eyes represented a potential method of torture.

"Someone! God dammit, these sons of bitches are... Ooof!" Albert's plea was interrupted by a hard punch to the stomach from Mark, something that both Lawrence and Garret approved of. Albert looked up at the cruel trio, merely black silhouettes against the bright light that passed over them. They appeared like specters haunting his every expression of pain.

"What do you want from me?" he whimpered with a tinge of fright.

"Nothing short of the truth," said Lawrence after a few second pause. He looked away from the face of dried blood and running sweat to address his colleagues. "Work on getting that the bookshelf out of the way. I'm gonna have a chat with our friend."

Mark looked up to Garret disappointingly as his appetite for violence would have to wait, his mind that of a sociopath hell bent on endless destruction. Garret motioned to Mark and the two left Lawrence alone with Albert. They began to remove the books off the shelf in a clutter of various noises. Albert tried to look behind him fearful of the damage they would cause.

Lawrence looked back down upon Albert with interest.

"I suggest you don't spit in my face again," Lawrence said. He proceeded to sit back upon the box from earlier. His balding head started to sweat slightly under the warmth of the

bulb above. There they sat staring at one another; one youthful face covered in spots of blood and the other old and clean. "So let's begin." Lawrence cleared his throat. "Have you been stealing whiskey from the family?"

An unsettling silence endured between the two, save for the sounds of moving books and furniture behind them. His head shook away from Lawrence as he avoided direct eye contact before finally looking straight at him. "No," he said simply, "I haven't."

"I don't believe you," said Lawrence accusatorily. "In fact, I think you're the one to blame for the recent string of thefts."

"What thefts?" asked Albert. "I don't know nothin' about no thefts." He licked around his mouth in an attempt to remove any last traces of bloody spit.

Lawrence moved a clenched fist swiftly into Albert's left cheekbone. Albert's head jerked to the right. The force caused his mouth to open briefly allowing a spot of crimson red to fly into the air and splotch the dull floor with a few dots of deep color.

Lawrence continued. "Don't play stupid. We know you're involved and we're going find out how."

With a new painful bruise on the left side of his face combined with the steady hurt of a broken nose, Albert struggled to reply. "Already... told you, I... didn't... do nothin'."

Lawrence responded aggressively punching him twice in the face, once on the right and once on the left. A weakened Albert began to blink rapidly as Lawrence grabbed him by his wet and greasy hair. He looked directly into the injured eyes, the black spot now fully formed on the right. "You're gonna start talking cause you don't have a choice. You see this." He removed the

wad of money from his pocket and unrolled it throwing the bills into Albert's face. "That is all the dirty money you been hidin' from different gangs around town. You're playin' a dangerous game and now you need out."

Albert allowed salty streams to run down his face. He blinked hard in an effort to resist crying, but the fear and pain brought them out. He felt ashamed at the tears, like they were marks of defeat. However, Albert's commitment was steadfast; he refused to give up and tell them further information.

Lawrence became briefly distracted by the progress on the bookshelf across the room. Garret and Mark now carefully began to move it from the wall resulting in the grating sound of wood against concrete. After struggling, the secret room was finally revealed as a wood doorway. Mark kicked the wood until the thin yet durable piece of plywood gave way under his strength.

Garret signaled to Lawrence pointing at the pitch black within the doorway. The room was dark and cluttered, only lighter shadows visible against a darker background. Mark pushed over the remnants of the bookshelf aside and began pushing onward but found himself stopped by Garret's hands, waiting for Lawrence's signal.

Lawrence addressed Albert again. "We've found your hiding space Mr. McMillan. We're just a few minutes from finding the truth. Anything you'd like to add before we enter."

"There's nothing..." His head slumped back and he breathed heavily amidst the pain in his face. "Nothin' there for you to see."

Lawrence rubbed at his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. He found this sense of denial disgruntling. He didn't see the point in resisting when the truth was clearly close by. "We'll see," said Lawrence.

He signaled to Garret who dropped down his hand and let the youngster enter the room. Albert made little change to his behavior, simply continuing to breath heavily against the running trails of blood and sweat and a wild mess of frizzy hair.

"Let's find a light kid," Garret's voice echoed from the dark.

The pair searched until Mark finally had success in grabbing a string hanging from the ceiling. "Got it," he said pulling down on it. Unlike the weak basement bulb, this one came to life quickly illuminating the room.

"Well would you look at that," said Garret removing his hat. Mark walked next to Garret and joined him in looking over the massive haul.

A collection of alcoholic beverages in a wide variety of containers were scattered about the mysterious room. Large wood barrels of beer made up the bottom row against the wall. Atop this were large containers of vodka and moonshine. They all gleamed under the intense radiance that painted the two men in a light shade of artificial blue. However, the most impressive item stored in the room was a large still, which could be used to make a variety of liquors.

"Damn, son of a bitch has quite the operation," said Garret.

"Do tell," said Mark sarcastically.

Garret answered without recognizing the sarcasm. "Start lookin' through these bottles and put any that are whiskey aside. If you can't tell, smell em'."

“And why don’t you have to deal with any of this shit?” asked Mark.

“I’ll be right back. Make sure to check those documents too,” he said pointing over to the desk cluttered with papers.

Garret walked over to Lawrence who was smoking a cigarette and leaning against the far wall with his eyes on Albert. He lazily flicked his lighter up and down producing an alternating flame of orange and yellow. He approached Lawrence and whispered quietly into his ears, which Lawrence responded to with a brief nod. Garret returned to help Mark in the search and Lawrence returned to his self-made cardboard seat in front of Albert casting his cigarette upon the ground. With the relaxing effect of tobacco and nicotine upon his body, he commenced forward with his interrogation.

Lawrence began, “So, you’ve been quite the busy man I hear.”

Albert turned his eyes on Lawrence showing off his shaking his lips and furrowing his brows in rage. Against the blood and cuts, he opened his mouth to speak, but found could not find the words sufficient to describe his emotions.

Lawrence continued, “Finding a way to get into our market – that’s always a dangerous game.” He began to walk around Albert.

Albert took a deep breath and swallowed another glob of bloody saliva. He had finally regained the ability to speak back. “You guys make it dangerous.”

“Anything illegal is dangerous Mr. McMillan,” said Lawrence amid the clanking of glass bottles from the other room. “What I’m most curious about is why you decided to get involved. Can you tell me that?”

“Why the sudden interest?” he asked clearing his throat.

“I’m just surprised, that’s all.”

The flow of blood from the newly formed cut upon Albert’s cheek started to slow. It contrasted sharply from the darkening bruise upon his face. He occasionally winced in pain, but the tears from earlier had disappeared. He was determined to keep his honor. “What’s there to be surprised about? Everyone wants a little of the action.”

“So you admit that you’ve been stealing,” said Lawrence.

“Stealing? No.” Albert sniffled. “I’m in the business of redistribution, something people are willing to pay a lot for.”

Lawrence scratched at his face with his right hand, unconsciously moving his fingers along the lines of his face that coincided with Albert’s scars. “Enlighten me,” he implored.

He gathered the bravery to speak clearly with a partial eloquence. “Redistribution is making sure somebody has something, no matter where they are in life. It’s about getting everyone something, not just those on top.”

Lawrence smiled in amusement. “And where do I fit into this little idea of yours?”

Albert looked at his captor in anger. “You’re the people who’ve sold yourselves wholesale to the highest bidder. All you care about it is who will pay the most.” Lawrence stood up from his seat and started to pace in front of Albert again. Unabated, Albert continued his explanation. “It is people like you that make sure no one can get what they want. You sir, make life shit for others.”

Lawrence stopped his pacing and stopped in front of Albert smiling and shaking his head slightly. “You really are a fool – so naïve and optimistic even in the face of death.” Albert gulped nervously. Lawrence finished, “What you suggest is unnatural.”

“Unnatural?” questioned Albert.

“Yes, unnatural. This city is run by pattern, albeit not a perfect one, but it gets the job done. People work so they can earn their daily bread. When you give others what they don’t deserve, then you’re destroying their will to live.”

Albert chuckled loudly despite the shooting pain stemming from his beaten face. “I think you’re the one killing others.” He paused to lick above his lips, removing some of the blood that was running from his nose to his mouth. “Shootin’ them when they don’t agree and all. I’m tryin’ to do something good, something that’ll pay back for all that pain you’ve caused,” he said loudly.

“We do what we do because we have too.” Lawrence grabbed Albert by the head and leaned in closer so that their eyes were level. He felt the need to explain their role in all of this, partly because of Albert, but mostly as a mere reminder for himself.

Lawrence continued, “If I weren’t here, you’d be working without accountability. That’s the thing about money and power: it changes you, makes you a dishonest man. We’re preventing you from cheating the system and taking the funds for yourself.” Lawrence let go Albert’s head, throwing it violently backwards.

“And that’s why you’re going to kill me, to make a fucking point?” answered Albert angrily through a brief burst of fear. A few stray tears started to roll down his cheeks again.

“I never said that. I’ll just do what needs to be done.”

Albert became incredibly anxious and disheartened at this comment. He tried again to remove the ropes, but he could only loosen them slightly. This exasperated his panic so that the few tears from before turned into a downpour of saltiness running amongst the cuts and bruises. “What makes you so special? What gives you the right,” he blabbered, “to play God?!”

Garret approached the sad scene of a crying man breaking under the slow and calculated weight of one superior in age. Garret and Mark expressed thin veils of sadness at the scene of pain and misery unfolding, but these were simple masks to avoid feeling inhumane. Lawrence had long since abandoned trying to care, always found himself feeling a sickening nausea in living that lie.

Lawrence looked upon his hatted colleagues with some curiosity. Mark held in his hand a large bottle. His attention returned to the sobbing man in front of him. “No matter what you may think, I don’t want to hurt you,” said Lawrence truthfully, but with a heavy heart as he considered the possibility of another haunting blank face.

“Bullshit,” he said quietly. “It’s fucking bullshit!” he yelled loudly while violently rocking his chair.

“I don’t play God,” said Lawrence. “I simply play by the rules, his rules,” he said. To this comment, Mark rolled his eyes.

He walked around Albert, just close enough so the salty stench of blood and sweat could clog his nostrils. He looked to Garret for the evidence gathered. “What have you got?” asked Lawrence.

Garret quietly passed him the bottle. Lawrence looked at its shape noting any connections it might have to their own. A stout round base followed by a short prominent neck, the structure was similar to many bottles they dealt with. However, the label read *KING'S*, a Canadian specialty that the family had just recently started to ship to the states and had been present on the three stolen shipments that they were investigating.

“Only one bottle?” said Lawrence.

“That’s all there was,” said Garret plainly.

Garret stood behind the chair while Lawrence returned to Albert’s front, the bottle in hand. Lawrence presented it to Albert like it was a gift, making sure the label was completely legible. “Recognize this?” asked Lawrence.

Albert’s eyes scanned the bottle top to bottom. He seemed mesmerized by the gold ribbon against a field of black. “No,” he finally said.

When Lawrence found difficulty in his interrogations, he often found that the mere threat of physical harm could push a man to speak openly. He turned to Garret, knowing that in six years witnessing his colleague’s violence made him an excellent candidate for such tasks.

Lawrence spoke to Garret. “Help me out, will you.” On command, Garret immediately grabbed the captive man violently by the neck. He knew the amount of force needed to cause extreme pain and life fearing panic without severing life-giving oxygen from the rest of the body. Thus, Albert’s expression of resistance turned into the fear of death. His eyes bulged slightly as his face began to redden. He gasped for air like a goldfish out of water, believing itself ready to die.

Lawrence watched on patiently for the ten to fifteen seconds of choking. Without any outside struggle from Albert's own hands, Garret let his hands take full force and push deeper against the Adams apple. He looked forward to Lawrence with a calm outward expression trying to ignore the brief squeals that rung up from the crushed esophagus. Neither of them looked down upon their victim as they both feared feeling any empathy that might interfere with the task at hand.

At the raising of Lawrence's right hand, Garret let go of his neck and with a jolt of his head, Albert slunk forward breathing in the precious air of which he had been denied. His watery eyes dropped fearful tears as he slowly recovered with his last few inhales. The fear of death had settled, a fear that Lawrence counted on when looking for the answers.

"Like I said, I don't want to hurt you, but he will," said Lawrence volunteering Garret.

Standing behind Lawrence's box, he addressed Albert. "So let's try this again you stupid son of a bitch. Do you recognize that bottle?"

Albert responded with a slight sob. "Yes."

Garret kept pushing. "Where is that bottle from?" Albert looked away in a continual refusal of stubbornness.

"Where the fuck is that bottle from?" asked Garret again in a far more demanding tone. His deep voice boomed throughout the basement.

Albert avoided answering the question again and instead looked towards the lesser of two evils: the captor that wasn't demanding an answer. His scarred face and black eye begged

forgiveness, but Lawrence had none to give. His mind was preoccupied with finding out the truth and finishing the job. The concept of mercy had yet to cross his mind.

“You don’t want to talk?” asked Lawrence.

Albert coughed and made a quiet, but defiant, response. “Go to hell.”

Lawrence’s stony exterior gave way to a more vengeful expression. He dug in his pocket for the smooth ivory handle of his switchblade. The knife had been a gift of initiation into the family, and since then had collected the blood of many poor souls. He started to believe that tonight would bring a new strain of crimson upon the sharp edge.

In the cover of tranquility, he removed the knife from his pocket carefully and pushed in the worn-out button, a sinister blade shooting out. Painstakingly cleaned with oil and polish, the metal sparkled against the light as Lawrence turned the hand holding the blade. Albert’s apprehensive face reflected upon the knife as Lawrence stood from his seat.

“Have it your way,” Lawrence said with a smirk.

Lawrence grabbed at Albert’s face and he shook his head violently to escape. Garret hit Albert over the head to subdue him and pushed his victim’s head along the chair’s back. Lawrence moved in carefully with the knife towards Albert’s scruffy neck. Lawrence tried to allow for him to speak, but Albert continued to admit nothing. With a slight wince, Lawrence watched as it dug down into the skin on his neck.

“Tell us where it is.” demanded Garret. As the knife pierced further, warm blood began to dribble down his throat. Albert clenched his jaw in an effort to resist pain.

Lawrence continued to push forward with the knife. “It’s up to you. This can all be over if you just tell us the truth.” Albert howled and resisted Garret’s grip. Lawrence was determined to keep going until the answers came, but was conscious of the beating jugular that could end Albert’s life.

“Looks like we got ourselves one of them communists,” shouted Mark approaching the pair. Lawrence eased up on the knife and looked into Albert’s frightened eyes. He finally pulled away and replaced the bloody switchblade to his pocket, not caring that drops of Albert’s blood rubbed off on his clothing.

Garret loosened his grip upon Albert’s head and violently pushed him forward. “What the hell you talkin’ about?” he questioned Mark.

Mark approached them flipping through the pages of a small worn out green book. “Take a look at this. He’s got passages underlined and everything.”

Garret grabbed the book from his hand and turned to the front page. On the yellowed paper was the title in bold letters: *THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO AND OTHER SELECTED READINGS*. He closed the book and tossed it to Lawrence. Lawrence read the front cover with both interest and surprise. He knew little of the supposed communist threat, besides its role as a sort of witch-hunt. He read in the newspapers about how “the reds from Russia have landed on US soil with the sole goal of corrupting our freedom loving children,” a comment that made Lawrence chuckle given their tendency to over exaggerate any threat to the status quo.

He scanned the pages slowly trying to make a connection between the underlined segments of the text. Multiple passages had been highlighted or marked up. Terms like *elite* and

the oppressed seemed show up again and again, allowing Lawrence to paint a clearer picture of the text in hand.

“See,” said Mark grabbing at Albert’s chin with his thumb and forefinger. “This here’s the face of a commie.” Mark let go of his face and observed the spots of warm blood upon his hand; he had touched the cut from the knife wound in his neck. Mark looked down in disgust and wiped his hands on Albert’s shirt.

““The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, that each time ended, either in the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes,” read Lawrence aloud. He threw the book back to Garret in dissatisfaction. “Is this shit where you get your inspiration?”

The three of them looked down at Albert who grew increasingly nervous at the thought of more torture. Remembering the stinging pain in his neck, he realized that his life relied upon providing some sort of answer to their questions. He coughed loudly in an effort to clear his throat. “I take inspiration from what is fair.”

“And what they say is fair?” asked Lawrence.

“Yes... yes it is,” he responded.

“Fuck that,” blurted out Mark. “That commie crap is a load of shit.”

“Maybe to you,” said Albert.

“I worked for what I earned. All you commies want to do is take away from everyone else cause you can’t get shit,” shouted Mark back sharply.

“I’m not a god damn commie, boy,” he said in an angered tone. As the throbbing in his face grew, numbness set in so that his words sounded forced and blunt.

“Then what are you?” asked Garret who was lighting a cigarette anticipating the long discussion at hand. “How would you describe yourself?”

“A man of the people,” he said simply.

“A man of the people?” questioned Garret with the cigarette still in his mouth.

“A socialist,” interrupted Lawrence.

Albert spit out a glob of blood and saliva onto the ground in front of Lawrence’s shoe. He proceeded to speak again. “If you want to label it that way.”

“Same damn thing,” retorted Mark. “Each of em’ wants what they can’t get.”

“People like you are the reason others can’t get what they want. Just look here. I’m tryin’ to give the people something you’re not going to provide to everyone.”

“So you lead the crusade then, eh?” said Lawrence. “A world where every man can get what they want.”

“It’s not a crusade,” answered Albert. “It’s the future.”

Lawrence rubbed at his chin thinking of the words said in the book. The oppressed peoples, opposition, and revolutionary society: they all were lies, simply unrealistic ideas to

create false hope in a cruel and cold world. He was surprised at Albert's fervor and devotion to such principles, but also at his decision to try and profit off of the bootlegging business. He sat back down in his makeshift seat and leaned forward to address Albert.

"So tell me, what's a socialist doing in the bootlegging business?"

"I already told you: I wanted a piece of the action, plain and simple." Albert's dulling eyes drifted away again in an effort to avoid a direct confrontation, perhaps another indication of a lie, something that Lawrence noticed.

"I think there's more to it. Yes, you are trying to make sure every man has the opportunity to get a bit of forgetfulness through a quick drink, but you are trying to make profit like a capitalist," said Lawrence.

"I ain't a capitalist," responded Albert.

"Then there's obviously something more to this little operation of yours cause a true socialist wouldn't be in the business for himself, now would he?" said Lawrence smiling.

"A man's got to do something to live," he said. "Especially when times are hard."

"So you're saying you acted out of mere desperation?" asked Lawrence trying to understand. Garret continued to smoke against the nearby wall while Mark stood behind Lawrence. Both were still listening to the man unfolding in front of them.

"I'm sayin' I acted cause you fuckers weren't gonna let anyone else sell."

"We may be protective of our business Albert, but it's thieves we've got an issue with," said Lawrence. Albert looked on in rage, as Lawrence grabbed the bottle from Garret's hands

and presented it to him. “The fact that you’re a man of the people does little to explain why this bottle was in that room. This is a brand only our organization serves.”

“I don’t know why it’s there,” said Albert.

“And why the fuck wouldn’t you know why it’s there commie?” asked Mark.

Albert looked away again trying to create some sort of defense for the accusations at hand, but he knew the evidence was piling up. “Sometimes things get a bit mixed up when you’re doing business. You know how it is. Maybe someone sold me that there bottle and they’re the real crooks,” Albert said trying to appeal to them.

Mark responded with a thunderous laugh while Lawrence with a mere chuckle. “You’re funny, you know that. Most people would simply admit to what they’ve done, but not you.” He stood up again and began to pace about. “You have some misplaced sense of transparency. You have a hard time telling the truth. In your case, you believe the lies told to you in that foolish book about a society that can’t exist.”

Albert shook his head. “You’re like everybody else, out of hope, not believing change is possible.”

“I only believe that change is possible through what is accepted in this world through the rules laid out for us, rules us humans ain’t got the power to change,” said Lawrence.

“Stop with this religious bullshit,” said Mark.

“You’re God is dead,” said Albert.

“Well there’s one thing this guys got going for him,” responded Mark amused.

Albert spit onto the ground again adding to the collected piles of bloody mucous before him. “You know, maybe it’s Gods will to have a socialist world. That’s what I used to believe at least,” he said.

“You preach about hope, yet you gave up on the one thing that could have actually saved you. All you had to do was let the world unfold like he wanted and you would of gotten your fair share,” explained Lawrence.

“Got tired of seeing shit people get away with everything – people like you. Shit people collect the profits where they don’t deserve them. God may have failed to make it fair for others, but this system won’t,” explained Albert with the blood still running from the shallow cut in his neck.

“God doesn’t want the world to be fair, it’s just a simple fact,” said Lawrence. “God chose to make man unequal, some stronger than others, some weaker.” He looked to Mark and found that he was listening. “He made some wicked and some good.”

He stopped pacing and stood in front of Albert. “He wants there to be difference, so that one man can excel where another has failed. What you suggest goes against this very ideal, force all to think the same and removes any notion of greatness.”

“Perhaps every man can be great,” said Albert. “Maybe they don’t need to follow the wicked ideas in place.”

“You can’t escape fate Mr. McMillan. Not all men were meant to be great. Some are meant to public figures while others work behind the scenes removing the threats that contaminate society,” he said sitting back down upon the cardboard box.

“Don’t you see,” continued Lawrence, “the world you want can’t exist. Man is too greedy and self-centered for true equality. It’s a mere impossibility.”

“Why are you so critical of the world?” asked Albert with tears in his black eye from the shooting pains. “What the hell happened to you?”

“I saw reality friend, a reality that doesn’t allow your kind to exist,” he said with a vengeance.

The tears ran cleanly once again from his face as he realized his moment of death was upon him. He gave up any sort of struggle and abandoned the rational thought which he had just expressed. With his principles defended against the claws of death, he let the full force of the fear wash over him. “Kill me then dammit. End a godless life.”

“First, I have to figure out who you’re working for,” said Lawrence.

“I’m on my own,” said Albert fearfully.

“One man facing off against the entirety of the gangs in this city – it doesn’t make sense. No, even stealing product requires multiple men,” said Lawrence removing the knife from his pocket and letting it dazzle amongst the fading bulb. The bloody spots staining the blade began to turn brown. Albert shook in fear recalling the pain in his neck. He started to imagine that pain applied elsewhere on his body and the shaking movements increased.

“You communists and socialists are like a plague,” said Lawrence. “You spread your ideas amongst one another. You know that you must work together to achieve a goal. Logically considering these points, then you must have some friends that have been helping you.”

“You are a dumb son of a bitch, not believing the truth when you see it,” snapped back Albert. “I’ve told you everything I know, so why don’t you just slit my goddamn throat!” he shouted.

“What makes you so ready to accept death? Who are you protecting?” asked Lawrence. Albert snarled and breathed in ready for a new set of shouts against these claims. However, before he could get anything out Garret interrupted.

“Not so fast,” he said looking through the book again. He walked over to Lawrence and handed him the book pointing to a hand written note on the last page. The note read:

TO MY FRIEND ALBERT, MAY YOU HAVE LUCK IN PROMOTING A
BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR ALL OF MANKIND AND LET THIS BOOK BE A
REMINDER OF THE WORLD WE STRIVE FOR. BE CAREFUL IN YOUR
QUEST.

- MARTIN MULLER, JUNE 1931

Lawrence read the note carefully noting the unusual reference to a quest. It had only been written a year and a few months ago, more than enough time to establish a network of fellow bootleggers. However, he thought that there must be more to understand. He looked to the scared Albert for answers.

“Is this your quest?” he asked Albert.

Albert took a brief pause before answering the question. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Lawrence turned the book towards Albert so that he could clearly read the note. “Who is Martin Muller?” he asked in a more aggressive tone.

Albert paused again and looked to his shirt. He saw the red spots that had collected since the beginning of the interrogation. “An old friend,” he said not lifting his head.

Lawrence grabbed him by the chin and forced him to look straight into his eyes. “Let’s try that again, except look at me. Who is Martin Muller?”

His eyes looked forward with anger, but he still answered the question in the same monotonous way. “Like I said, an old friend.”

Lawrence kept hold of his chin. “Would he happen to know anything about this, about your quest?” asked Lawrence.

Albert’s eyes grew slightly wider at the comment followed by another more vengeful glance. His voice grew harsh. “If you can read, it says he gave me that book as a gift. My quest was opening this shop.”

“And that shop wouldn’t have anything to do with selling illegal liquor, would it now commie?” asked Mark.

“Fuck you kid,” he said. “I already told you, he’s simply an old friend, end of story. Are we done yet?”

Lawrence narrowed his eyes and looked past those scars. The one thing he remembered from his father was his emphasis on the truth behind the eyes, a bit of personality in them.

Lawrence had perfected this skill in the only piece of homage to his father. In Albert’s eyes he

saw glimmers of truth, but his options had been strained. He saw only one option left, one that brought a heavy guilt to his heart.

“You’re really not going to tell us, are you,” said Lawrence.

Albert didn’t respond. He simply looked right back at him with that same plain expression from earlier in an act of defiance. It was this look that turned to panic when Lawrence lifted the knife again into the clear air. His mouth opened widely as a new fear took over. He could already feel the sharp pain applied to the rest of his body. He pleaded with Lawrence.

“No, please don’t. Stop!” he yelled.

Lawrence would give no mercy for a man that had refused so many chances. He flipped the knife around so the blade was pointing downward towards his bare lap. He raised the knife above his head in a quick motion and let the blade slice downward through the thin air. Lawrence let the knife plunge down into his thigh so that only half the blade showed. Once it had entered sufficiently far enough, Lawrence aggressively twisted the handle so that the wound spread open and gushed a large amount of blood that spread about his leg.

Albert bit hard on his lip in an effort not to cry, but it did little to stop the rush of salty water from his eyes and the overactive nerves pulsing within. He let out a loud scream that travelled from the basement to the floor above. Mark was startled by the sharp noise and jumped backwards slightly. Garret reacted differently, throwing his cigarette aside and moving in on the noise. He covered his mouth with his large hand until the noise cleared.

New tears ran fresh against his face as he blubbered about in between the sniffles and weeping. “You...stupid. Fuck all of you!” he yelled.

He never enjoyed harming a man of reason, even if his reasoning was different from his own. He gave a brief sigh, letting a momentary instance of regret fall over him. However, he wouldn't let regret distract him from his true objective, no matter how bloody or sinister it might be. Thus, his face returned to a stone cold expression of indifference.

"Give us the answers we need and this all stops. Who is Martin Muller?"

Albert clung onto resistance, but found that his principles were beginning to wear away under excruciating torment. "We... worked together... a few years back."

"Is he one of the men you've been working with?" Lawrence asked. "Tell us and we'll make sure you get out of here in one piece."

Albert faltered slightly in his response. "I'm not... I'm working alone."

"Reconsider your response," added Garret from behind Albert. "It's for your own good."

Albert leaned his head back and looked into Garret's eyes, devoid of any remorse. There was fresh fear in the fact that none of the individuals before him seemed to care about the agony they were causing.

"You won't... oppress me. We... will rise," he whimpered.

Mark openly mocked him. "Look at that! Even when faced with death the commie still holds onto his precious beliefs!"

Albert cried again but was silenced by Garret's hands covering his mouth. He shook his head violently in horror as he watched Lawrence casually lift up the knife again high into the air. He let it fall with greater force than before into his other leg. This time only a quarter of the knife

was exposed above the leg. Lawrence let go of the handle and let the knife stick out openly. Blood poured out forth from around the edges of the blade. A muffled scream rang out from behind Garret's hands louder than the one previous.

Garret let go and Albert let his head fall as he cried openly upon seeing the blade stuck. Having no one else to turn to, he begged his captors for help. "Please... help me," he said looking to Lawrence.

"Give us answers," said Lawrence.

Albert simply looked up to Lawrence with the same sad injured eyes that had pleaded for help. Lawrence knew that dejected look. It was the expression of a man nearly defeated by the suffering of others. Without another word, he lifted the blade from his leg allowing even more blood to pour out. The sight of so much blood made Albert light headed.

Lawrence turned around the knife and let the bloody blade rest carefully against the inner seams of his leg leading up to his crotch. He raised the knife into the air and carefully aimed at the zipper in his pants. Albert, realizing what Lawrence's intended target was, began to rock violently in his chair despite the great pangs of discomfort shooting from his legs.

Mark's eyes widened as he watched the knife hover carefully over his groin. He expressed his disbelief. "Jesus Lawrence, don't go and neuter the man," he said. Lawrence turned around surprised at the youngster's objection. Albert cringed at the word neuter.

"It's his choice if he's not gonna speak." He watched as Garret backed away his hands allowing to try and let Albert speak before the knife plunged into a most sensitive location.

“Shit, no. Don’t you fucking do it!” he yelled hoping an aspect of aggression would deter the attack. However, it did nothing to slow the blade, and a charged panic set in. “Don’t do it,” he sobbed. “I’m begging you. For the love of God!”

“Answers Mr. McMillan! Answers now or I’m cutting off your goddamn balls!” screamed Lawrence in a dramatic outburst with a cracking voice.

Time slowed as Lawrence let the knife fall one last time. One could hear the blade cutting air like it had cut the flesh of Albert’s leg. Upon seeing the flashing metal fly downwards, Albert felt the intense realization that this was his last chance. With tears streaming down his eyes, he finally yelled. “Stop, I’ll tell you the truth!”

Lawrence let the blade complete its projected course and plunge deep, into the wood of the chair in front of his crotch. Albert opened his eyes and looked in disbelief as the knife stuck cleanly from the rough wood bottom. A breath of relief fell over him as he let out a few final cries. It had taken an extreme threat, but he had finally broken under the combined fury of denied reason followed by physical power.

Mark spoke with a spat of distaste upon his tongue. “You’re one sick son of a bitch!” he said loudly.

“Got to make use of fear kid,” he said still looking at Albert. “You don’t always need to finish the job, just make it known you’re serious.” He tugged at the knife stuck in the wood and finally came loose.

“So those answers, we’d like them sir,” said Lawrence completely changing his tone away from the angry intensity that had earlier been demonstrated. He changed it to be more soothing in an attempt to relax the frayed man.

Albert gulped and looked ahead with new eyes, eyes that spoke to Lawrence of simple honesty. “I worked...” he said breaking away for a moment.

“Go on,” Lawrence said.

“I worked with Mr. Muller to set up my contacts,” he said pausing to sniffle, “to buy booze.”

“Where can we find him?” asked Garret.

“I don’t know,” Albert said.

Lawrence shot back a look of anger and laid the knife carefully in front of his leg so Albert had a clear view reminding him of the pain caused. “You don’t?”

“I swear I don’t! I haven’t seen him in a year!” Albert shouted.

“Talk you fucking commie!” yelled Mark moving forward.

“Okay, I can’t tell you where he is but I can point you in the right direction.” He paused noticing that Lawrence was listening intently. “Talk to my contact, Leo. He works just out of the city to set up supply lines.”

Lawrence pushed for more answers. “Where can I find him?”

“I... I don’t know,” Albert responded.

“Bullshit! Nothin’ else but those words come out of this fuckers mouth!” shouted Mark.

“I swear! I never stole that shit. I just sold whatever he gave me!” yelled Albert.

“Cool it kid,” said Garret. “Dean works with the supply lines. He can point us in the right direction.”

“That’s all very interesting,” said Lawrence, “but that doesn’t explain what you’re goal in doing all of this is.”

Albert looked away. “That’s all you need to know,” he said.

Feeling a bit of remorse, Lawrence decided to not push the man any further for answers. He had the information they needed in their search. He wondered if Albert truly could simply be part of a system bent on making money in a dangerous market.

“What do you think you’re gonna do selling this shit? How do you think it’s gonna make a difference?” asked Garret.

“We can’t fight the conventional way, so we’ll fight you in a way you can understand: by hitting your wallets,” he said.

“You really are trying to start a war Mr. McMillan,” said Lawrence.

Lawrence pushed on Albert’s chest so that he fell backwards upon the floor and hit his head hard on the cement. Still conscious, he tried to look back up at the three men approaching him against the soft light of the basement but found them only to be mere shadows. To him, these were the faces of death, hell bent on making him suffer.

“You gave us the information we needed, but you played a dangerous game,” said Lawrence.

“So that’s it. You’re just going to kill me?” asked a nervous Albert.

Albert watched as the shadow shook his head in disagreement. “No, no. We just need to you to know that you understand.”

“What?” questioned the struggling Albert.

Garret approached Albert, still tied to the chair. With him retrained, Garret began with a barrage of kicks to Albert’s side. Garret looked to Mark for assistance and he joined in on causing his fair share of pain. Lawrence watched with a sick stomach as the image of blood and broken bones infiltrated his mind. He knew this had to be done, or else Albert would be a symbol of empty threats.

After this brief period of violence, Lawrence spoke up. “Enough,” he said. “Let’s get him to a phone. Don’t want him dying on us – not yet that is.”

A swollen and beaten Albert lay against the back of the chair on the floor with his bloodied and bruised body aching in pain. He felt light headed, but knew he had narrowly avoided the prospect of death. He no longer had the energy to react as Lawrence removed the blade from his pocket again, this time to simply cut Albert free from the chair. The three men lifted the limp body and carried it to the adjacent room where the alcohol was stored. Lawrence had requested he be placed there as there was a phone on his desk so he could call the hospital, something Mark didn’t fully support.

Upon throwing his body down on the floor in front of the desk with the phone, Lawrence said a final statement. "Believe me, you got lucky. If you didn't give us that information, you'd be dead right now."

Albert rolled over in pain to view the three men standing before him one last time. "If you call the cops, then we'll come back and finish what was started," said Lawrence.

"Good day Mr. McMillen," said Garret with a brief tip of his hat.

"Feel better you commie bastard," said Mark with one final insult.

Albert lay there in agony on the floor rolling about and grabbing at the many wounds he now wore. His vision was blurry and his mind hazy, but he found he was able to reach the phone and call for help. With this done, he crawled to the wall and leaned up against it letting one final cry. However, this cry wasn't for his pain, but for assisting his oppressors in their goal of destroying fellow members of the proletariat.

Chapter 5: Meaningless Labels

The man studies his reflection carefully amongst the reverberating ripples of the liquid. They appear to thin his swollen cheeks against the dimming lights above. His shallow eyes are droopy and depressed, tired from sleeping on the nearby curb the night before. The black suitcoat that doubles as his mattress is now faded and worn from the constant months of lying upon the hard unforgiving ground. The personal image of confidence, those bright eyes, toned muscles, and a variety of blazers have long since faded into obscurity along with the great masses of others ruined at the misery of this new decade.

He thinks again about that image and feels a brief tear return to his sullen eyes. He picks up the glass disturbing the sad reflection and gulps down the remaining half of the bitter liquid that has long served to numb out his pain. He's already had three, and at approximately one-hundred and ten pounds with an almost always empty stomach, the sloshing effects have started to take hold. After number one, a familiar sensation of warmth gathered at his stomach, a warmth he hadn't experienced since sleeping in an actual bed. Upon finishing number two, he began to easily remember all the dollar bills he had handled and all those ticket machines he had tediously kept track of in an effort to satisfy clients; now where was all that money? And finally after finishing his third, a strange mix of hopelessness and carelessness set in as to what his life had become. Suicide began to sound like a lovely option.

The bartender eyes the man curiously from behind the tall wooden counter. He's seen his fair share of poor disparate fools stumble in before, but this face had become common sight. They exchanged the occasional words over the world around them and how it was falling apart, typical conversation for men teetering on the edge of disaster. As usual, the patron developed a

drunken lisp and allow his mind to wander freely in the excitement discussion. Wiping wet pilsner glasses and the dark countertops, the bartender would nod and make for a slight grunt of agreement, only half-listening to the drunken stupor. Such was the Friday morning pattern of loose speech and disheartening tales between the pair, and today the alcohol seemed to flow more readily to his head.

The patron called out to the barkeep, who was now violently shaking a shining silver capsule making sure that the liquids within were thoroughly incorporated. “How the hell did you land that there job?” he said loudly with a lisp.

“What sir?” he asked as he carefully poured out a cloudy pink fluid from the shaker into a set of martini glasses. A waiter quickly swung by and placed the drinks on a tray.

“Don’t sir me, goddammit,” he blurted. “You make me feel like an old man.”

The bartender smiled in amusement. Their conversations always started in this way: an appeal to more casual speech. “Not one for the formalities, are you Seth?” he asked.

The sound of rushing air escaped from the cushion of Seth’s seat as he rocked gently back and forth. Licking his cracked lips, he answered the question. “Formalities don’t count for much nowadays.”

“I guess you’re right,” answered the barkeep brushing through the tangled mess of blonde hair that sat upon his scalp. He cringed as he picked away at the knots that had already formed despite a heavy brushing earlier in the morning.

“I mean, what the hell is callin’ some fool sir gonna do for ya? Nothin’ that’s what,” Seth said with the emphasis of drunken logic.

“It doesn’t make much of a difference now anyway,” the barkeep answered. “Not many people to impress.”

“There’s always people to impress” said Seth losing his balance slightly atop the stool.

“Oh really,” answered the bartender while wiping off the small pools of liquids that had started to form around the glass.

“Yes really, but calling em’ sir and ma’am won’t get you nowhere.” He frowned upon the empty glass. “It got me nowhere,” he mumbled.

“Have faith,” said the bartender. He continued to scrub away at the persistent splotch, but found that the rough towel did little to clean up the dried up spill.

“I had faith and it got me nowhere just the same,” Seth slurred.

“It’ll get better, it always does.”

“I admire your foolish optimism.”

The bartender threw the dirty towel aside into a nearby waste bucket. For the first time, he looked down upon Seth sitting there drunk. His heavy eyelids shuddered as he tried to keep them open against the fierce alcoholic warmth. A few drops of beer still clung to the very corners of his mouth and he tilted his head side to side in the same monotonous pattern. All of these were the same signs the barkeep had become accustomed to seeing.

The bartender leaned against the shimmering back wall of mirrors behind the counter and removed two loose cigarettes from the front pocket of his black apron. “Nothin’ foolish about it,” he said before holding out the second cigarette to Seth.

Seth took hold of it with loose fingers covered in smudged dirt and grease. “Easy for you to say, you’ve got a job.” He lazily placed it upon his lips and attempted to inhale the nonexistent smoke of an unlit cigarette.

The bartender lifted up a burning match carefully to Seth’s cigarette before lighting his own. He glanced about the speakeasy’s walls noticing how they hungrily absorbed the light and created a seemingly sad backdrop to their conversation. “Got lucky,” the bartender said simply. “Not much else to it.”

Seth let his eyes fall down upon his lap and soak up the image of torn pants. This pair had been the same he’d worn the day of the crash. He recalled rubbing away nervously at the creases feeling at the smooth material and long stitches while hearing about the rampant ticker tape that controlled his very fate. As the prices dropped further into the abyss, he rubbed away harder until his fingers burned with the heat of friction. Once the day came to a close, all he could think about was that pair of pants he was wearing, one of the few details he would be able to recall for some time. In the present he did the same nervous ritual when considering that day, the day capitalism died. And all he could think of was those pants: *Was the material always this smooth?*

“Just take a look around, you think skill’s got anything to do with it?” asked the bartender.

Seth’s reddened eyes were just barely visible as he lifted his head slightly. The drunken tears began to swell his sockets. “I... I don’t know,” he stammered.

The bartender felt guilt for the man in front of him, like he was talking down to him simply because he himself had been lucky enough to keep employment following the crash. But his field was different; it didn’t follow by the rules of the rest of the world. Somebody always

wanted a drink. They depended upon him for a solution to their troubles, the solution being a quick fix of absentmindedness. This strange power dynamic bothered him; he had simply wanted a job, nothing more. Unfortunately, he found himself representing a struggle he didn't fully understand.

The bartender inhaled the cancerous smoke before blowing it carefully back at the low hanging ceiling tiles and foggy lights. "Have hope friend," he answered slowly. It was the only solution he could think of.

Seth fought the tears and gulped down a wad of metallic tasting spit. Ash fell carefully upon the wooden counter as the cigarette continued to burn. "How'd you become a bartender anyway?"

The bartender started to wipe up the ash that had fallen with his sleeve. "Right place, right time," he said not wishing to elaborate.

"Any more than that?" Seth pressed.

"Not really, worked at a brewery before – wasn't gonna give up on something I'd done my whole life."

Seth hiccupped. "Makin' beer?"

"Serving the people," he answered plainly with another puff.

"Ha, servin' others got me far!" Seth snickered while nearly losing balance from his stool. "I served all of them rich fools, looked at those stupid numbers for them so they could make an extra buck."

The bartender started to focus on drying a collection of metal mugs while his cigarette slowly extinguished. “Not exactly what I meant by servin’ others.”

“Rich people are people too, ain’t they?”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” the bartender said.

“That’s right, I served others alright. I was a goddamn master of the market!” he shouted remembering the glory days.

“I bet you were,” responded the bartender with a tinge of guilt and annoyance.

All stockbrokers thought they were the best at what they did, and now almost all of them were sleeping on the streets. Yet, that feeling of sorrow remained, for all these men embraced the only reality that could keep them sane. Out of this sense of pity, the bartender’s responses of approval came. He believed it was the least he could do for these wandering ex-financiers.

“I bet you were,” the bartender repeated with these thoughts in mind.

Seth continued to talk loudly, in part to reassure his own statements. “I was great at my job, had a god damn sense of purpose!”

“Oh really...” said the bartender fading away from the diluted man.

“Yes, I made sure...” Seth paused abruptly. The bartender turned around surprised at the momentary silence. Such rants from Seth weren’t usually so broken. He feared that he may have had too much, that now he had to clear his stomach.

“Made sure about what?” asked the bartender.

Seth didn't respond as he was lost in thought about the past and what difference all of it made. The pain and suffering associated with remembering a past life, one of establishment and comfort, ebbed slowly into his mind.

"You need the bathroom?" asked the bartender.

Seth turned the head that lay upon his hunched shoulders and looked directly into the bartender's eyes. Like the tall glasses of beer, they reflected his image perfectly. He saw someone he didn't recognize. A man without a home, a man without purpose, he was a man of nothing. He owned nothing except his own broken spirit.

"You need the bathroom?" the bartender repeated.

"No dammit," he responded with some anger, "I don't need your damn bathroom."

The bartender eyed him curiously at the charged comment. Most times, he would have spoken back in an equal degree of resentment. But today he had not the heart to speak angrily to a drunken unemployed man. "You okay?" he asked instead in a monotone voice.

Seth rubbed at his heavy eyelids with the palm of his hands and spoke. "I'll be okay, I'll be okay." He placed his palms back upon the counter and let the few tear drops that clung to his skin spread along the grooves of the wood.

Seth continued, "Things will get better, they got to."

"They always do," said the bartender putting out his cigarette into a nearby ash tray behind the counter.

"Just need to find a job, that's all," said Seth hopefully.

“That’s what it all comes down to friend,” answered the bartender. “Working: it’s the American dream.”

“A chicken in every pot,” Seth said recalling the words of president Hoover whilst swaying his glass in the air as if he was a child playing with a toy airplane. His frown quickly changed to a boyish smile as the words readily poured forth.

The bartender gave a slight chuckle. “Prosperity’s a funny thing,” said the bartender reflecting on the previous decade of extravagance. “A funny thing indeed.”

The bartender became distracted by a brief knock on the speakeasy’s door. It was the beginning of the five o’clock crowd: a mix of degenerates and lowlifes that had little more to do than drink and gamble, some by mere desperation while others by choice. The bartender took a deep breath and signaled to the fellow employee covering the door. He tilted his head forward with an unsaid understanding and he pushed aside the thick plank of black metal revealing an open slit in the wooden door. He looked through the open slot at the first guest for the night.

A youthful man, no older than twenty five, stood in front of the door with eyes deadead on the open slot. The employee didn’t recognize the smooth curvatures of his face or the dark navy hat he sported amongst his head. Rough patches of stubble suggested he had recently shaved in an indication that he wasn’t homeless. The stony features and prominent chin suggested the epithet of strength and resilience, an aspect of human character that had been dying in men roaming about the country in their pleas for desperation.

With a partial admiration for the image before him and part suspicion due to unrecognizability, the employee questioned this figure through the slot. “May I help you?”

“I’m meeting a friend,” he responded.

His speech came off as prophetic, like every word he said deserved respect and importance no matter how small or insignificant they were to the overall understanding. The employee was surprised as this voice didn’t match the appearance of its speaker. “*May I help you?*” the employee asked with far more emphasis.

The man looked about for a moment as if he had been suddenly struck by an intense confusion. However, through this mask of emotion he still spoke a single word with the same eloquence. “Chrysanthemum.”

The employee looked on for a brief moment with the judgmental eyes of before, but felt confident the police hadn’t yet determined the speakeasy’s password. It had been changed a few weeks back following the raid. He tossed aside the heavy bolt in the doorway and pulled back on the door handle letting the bottom dig further into the damaged wood flooring. As was customary, he opened the door only a crack in the effort to draw as little attention as possible. Once inside, the man’s full figure could be seen. His slim shoulders and long arms made him appear far taller than he actually was. At a mere five foot eleven, he looked to be average sized when compared to the few others sitting around the bar.

“Don’t cause any trouble,” the employee said closing the door.

The man removed his hat and revealed a sandy brown mop of hair that was both wild and unkempt in yet another revelation of his youth. Without answering the employee’s warning, he slowly walked over the counter that Seth and the bartender were. He pulled back the cushioned stool and sat down letting his dark navy suit coat flow carelessly around the seat. The man didn’t attempt to order anything; seeing that his guest hadn’t yet arrived he simply sat and listened to

the conversation taking place. Neither of them took much notice of the man that was only a few seats away.

“Promoting prosperity,” Seth blurted with a hiccup, “that was my job.”

“Promoting prosperity?” questioned the bartender.

“That’s right goddammit. All that excitement, all those parties, you’ve got me to thank,” he said waving his hands about wildly nearly causing him to fall off his chair.

“Alright Seth, whatever you say,” responded the bartender starting to turn away from Seth as he believed drunkenness had started to take full effects upon the man’s clarity. He yelled again before the bartender could successfully break away and disregard the slurred comments.

“I’m serious!” he slurred. “My job made this god damn place soar. I made sure the money flowed, that those goddamn good times kept going.”

“You were a broker, not a banker,” said the bartender plainly. The nearby man turned his head slightly towards the speaking pair.

“I was better than a stupid banker. I controlled people’s money, rich people’s money. I had power!” he yelled.

“Alright, alright, calm down,” chided the bartender.

It was to no avail. Seth had already slipped beyond the veil of others and into the surreal reaches of what had been, of what was. “And now I got nothin’ to show for it. I watched over those trades like it was my own fuckin’ child goddammit! Men had to respect me then!” Seth pounded his fist on the counter in a fit of rage. Every patron in the bar, including the man at the

counter, turned with fleeting surprise only to return to the pools of intoxicating liquids in their glasses.

“Don’t make me kick you out Seth. Have some control,” pleaded the bartender.

“I had control, control over the biggest goddamn market in the world,” Seth said.

The bartender ran his fingers through his hair in aggravation. “Jesus,” he exclaimed.

Seth’s loose face of peaceful sadness scrunched up into the appearance of fury and rage. He balled his fists as more memories of what he had endured returned to the forefront of his mind. “I’ve had to sleep outside like a fucking dog, and no one gives a damn. They just walk on by.”

“Life’s gotta keep moving,” added the bartender.

“I made the money flow through the very veins of this goddamn country! Amber waves of grain, the land of milk and honey: all that fantastic bullshit. Well look at me now!” he shouted holding his arms up like a magician trying to do some great reveal at the end of a trick. The trick here was far crueler however, the trick being one of a fate, a trick where money was its twisted tool of misery.

Seth moved to the edge of his seat and pointed his index finger forward at the bartender. The bartender moved back cautiously unsure what he was about to say or do. “I remember the day I knew it was all over; it hit me like a car.”

“Hmmm,” responded the bartender who had refocused his efforts on checking the levels of alcohol left in the taps. The mysterious man in the blue coat casually lit a cigarette amidst the hastening steps of new customers entering with the same flowery password that he had used

earlier. Cigarette hanging just barely in the grip of his moistened lips, he turned his ears again slightly so he could more easily listen to the conversation at hand.

“A cold Friday, that’s what it was. And the first! Yes, that’s right, only days before my birthday, the first without a home,” he loudly talked amidst the disinterested expressions of the man behind the bar.

He continued, “I hadn’t eaten in days, felt like my stomach was dying. Ya know that feeling when you don’t have food in your stomach, but you feel like you wanna vomit, that’s what it was like. Man, starving must be a brutal way to go – know how that feels now.”

“Well you lived,” added the bartender.

“That I did, that I did.” He swayed again in the flimsy oak stool. “Eventually I found a goddamn line of sorry men out on the sidewalk. They all looked like death, barely stading there clutching onto an old brief case or a stupid bible. Then there were the ones that had goddamn newspapers wrapped around their arms for warmth – newspapers for God’s sake! Not even a fucking blanket!”

“Resourceful I suppose,” said the bartender filling up another glass of beer before taking a large sip and slamming it down on a ledge against the wall.

“Swore I’d never have to go into those lines and beg for food – told myself that I’d find a way. Well, when all your options run out and your stomach feels like shit, you’d be surprised what some men do. Ran up to that line fast – nearly knocked over one of those men with newspapers wraps. He didn’t even turn around; he was busy blowing into his gloved hands, gloves that had no fucking fingers left,” Seth finished looking into the grooved pattern of rough

wood on the counter. To his eyes, they looked like the large canyons he had once seen in Arizona, a place of warmth and beauty he associated with his youth. How he wished he was there now.

“Did you get your food?” the bartender questioned.

Seth lifted his head slowly with the blank stare of a man unaware of his surroundings, almost like some sort of deer caught in the incandescent beams of a fast moving car. With a note of somberness, he spoke the word simply. “No.”

“No?” said the bartender.

“No, I didn’t,” Seth said.

The bartender took another large gulp of beer before inquiring further. “Well, why not?”

Seth looked down again at the vast canyons below, all brown and jagged with the brief appearance of a splinter or two. He imagined a fierce river running amongst the crags carving further into the material with ever more permanence and coloration. He felt the blast of airy freedom rush across his face in the few second gap returning to a simple youth not disturbed by the image of dollar signs and advertising murals. *Those times are dead?* he thought. The grooves of the miniature canyon below started to fill with the saline solution of human agony.

His head was raised with brief momentum as he exposed his tear stained cheeks. The bartender appeared taken aback by the sudden swing from anger to grief. With his eyes looking forward at the mirrored reflection of the back wall, the blue-coated man continued to listen intently. Seth wiped away the salty water with his dirty sleeves and proceeded with the story.

“I got up to the front of that goddamn line and watched as some beautiful girl poured out cups of broth. She couldn’t have been more than twenty and she smiled away as the men collected the life giving substance – that stupid smiling bitch.”

Seth paused before continuing. “I took that bowl from her hands and our eyes met. They were green and fierce as hell like I was looking at a fucking demon or something.”

“She was just handing out soup,” said the bartender. “Probably was happy to just help.”

“It was more than that – it was that stare, a stare that recognized me as a poor man, a stare that cut through me and told me I was nothing. It was fucking God looking right at me tellin’ me I had nothing, that I was just like those poor fools in the line. I was nobody and those eyes of judgement were upon me.”

Both the bartender and the mysterious man listened with faces of stone, faces that hid any true emotions of remorse even if they had any. There was no blinking, no cringing, no change in physical appearance, none of that; only a pensive understanding masked in a shroud of carelessness.

“I dropped that bowl right then and there. I ran. I ran faster than I had ever before. I was running from life, from the realization that it all means nothing,” Seth said with a contorted face of movement. A fresh stream of tears erupted from his eyes before ending with with his final speech. “I worked for what I had my entire life and I wasn’t gonna start taking handouts.”

The barkeep spoke. “Why didn’t – ”

“This is America goddammit!” interrupted Seth pounding his fist onto the counter so his skin felt the many channels he had come to admire before. “You work for what you get.”

“You were hungry. You should have taken it,” said the barkeep placing his hands gently on Seth’s shoulders in an effort to reassure him, to tell him it was going to be okay. They looked at one another, the employed man full of pity for the drunk before him. “It’s gonna be ok.”

“What the hell do you know?” Seth spat back in anger, the tears still swelling in his eyes.

The barkeep abandoned his efforts to comfort the man. Seth watched as he let go his grip upon his shoulder and checked on some tables before disappearing into a set of swinging doors. The bartender wasn’t angry at Seth; he simply knew he couldn’t connect with the man. Talking from his position, from the point of the employed to the jobless couldn’t be understood, never would be understood. They were men destined for different fates, one with the money to purchase and the other subjected to begging for change only to spend it on shallow days in the speakeasy.

Seth stared forward with the despairing look of broken hopes. All of it had vanished before him, all of the investments that had seemed so pertinent at the time just gone. He wasn’t sure how it all came crashing down so fast in such a cruel and wicked way. He felt cheated by the country, by the American dream. Every day he sat cold and homeless only added to the mere tension that had been building within him. Who was he if no longer a broker of prosperity? He no longer felt the satisfying value of his work upon him. Now he just sat around waiting for something, whether recovery or death, whichever happened to come first.

Seth grabbed at his ragged hair and let his sadness flow from his eyes. He learned a simple fact: Americans don’t give a damn and he was alone. He felt he didn’t belong to the disillusioned masses walking about; he felt like a ghost passing through the world around him. Perhaps that was what terrified him about that smiling girl. She was the first to acknowledge him

as a man and not a simple embodiment of misery. She had looked past the hungry face and found the shreds of a previous life. He could count on no one for help as the judging eyes of others tortured his weakened soul.

“It was pride.” Seth heard a voice in his left ear. He turned his head slightly so the youthful man in the navy blue jacket was within eyesight. A still burning cigarette hung loosely on the tip of his tongue as he appeared calm and unwavering in his speech.

Seth sniffled and held back his crying. “What?” he asked weakly.

“It was pride that made you run like that, away from that soup line,” he said.

Seth took note of the man’s clean face and prominent features. His clean clothes and steady reassurance led him to believe that this was a man of income, that he had somehow survived the tumbling crash. It wasn’t uncommon for this; not everyone had been felt the effects. Seth simply found it strange that such a man had decided to speak to him. His own appearance suggested the air of homelessness, enough to make many men ignore him as they walked by and spat in his face about being a drain on their country, a country he felt only tolerated rather than welcomed his loneliness.

Seth spoke up with an intense knot of nausea in his abdomen and barely open eyes. “I don’t know.”

“It’s understandable,” the man said, his face a collection of old memories.

Seth’s drunken notions of understanding seemed disappeared as his mind faded into a blur. The memories only appeared here and there as sporadic shards, capable of only telling portions of the tale he had just described. “I guess.”

He took another long drag. “Sooner you accept that, sooner you can get on with your life.”

Seth, feeling eyes of judgement upon him, responded with anger. “How the hell do you know? Why the hell do you care?”

The man grabbed a nearby ash tray and pushed the nearly finished cigarette into the metallic sides. A few stray sparks jumped from the dish and fizzled away on the ligneous surface. Seth followed the embers and felt a bit of warmth against the tense feeling in his stomach. “We all have to care friend,” the man said.

“Nobody gives a shit about much nowadays,” said Seth with another high pitched hiccup.

“Just cause some don’t care doesn’t mean all don’t care.” He stood up from his seat revealing the long tails of his coat flowing well below his waist line and seated himself next to his new colleague. “Take for example that woman from your story. She cared. You were simply afraid of needing help.”

Seth frowned at the word bitch feeling a sense in shame for calling a woman he hardly knew a harsh undeserved name. Exhaustion tormented him as the alcohol readily flowed in his bloodstream. “Afraid of needing help?” he questioned bitterly.

“You believe in hard work to a fault, believe it can solve anything. And when it wasn’t the answer then, when you needed help, you didn’t know what to do.”

Seth looked at the deep pupils of the man and wondered what his story might be. What was it in this tear-stained unemployed man that had caused such interest, the story, mere pity? Seth couldn’t read the man, especially as the beer progressed his body further to the point of

vomiting and complete exhaustion. He thought a lot about the prospects of fearing help and shame. Were those qualities truthful through the words of the man? Could he see something that he didn't?

Seth asked with timidity, "Got a name?"

"Who's asking?" he asked.

Seth felt frustrated at his guest's secrecy. He wanted to know what made him qualified to say such things to him and if he could provide a solution. "Does it matter?"

"Depends," he said quietly looking back to the mirror at his tired reflection.

The inebriated Seth wouldn't end the conversation so easily. "Depends... depends on what?"

"Where you stand," he answered without turning towards Seth.

"Can you give me a damn straight answer. You've got to have a name. Part of our story, ya know," said Seth.

"Names don't mean much. We're all people just struggling to live."

Seth's face lit up slightly as he began to think again through the fog. "Maybe you feel shame in your name," Seth suggested.

The man, realizing that the conversation was going to continue, turned to Seth flashing bits of yellowed teeth when he spoke. "I carry the shame of the world around me, a world where each fellow man pushes each other down till they can't get up."

“What else is new? It’s the way this world here is goddammit. Don’t like it, you can leave it,” responded Seth truthfully.

The man looked back at Seth with furrowed brows and a stern frown of disapproval. “Then why not change the world and the way it thinks rather than run?”

“What the hell is one man gonna do?”

“He gathers with his fellow brothers and sisters in the act of unity and work towards a common goal together,” he answered quickly as if the words had been on the tip of his tongue.

Seth snarled deridingly, “Well some of us don’t want any goddamn help.”

“Everyone needs help.”

“You want to help us normal people is that it. Probably have some fucking cozy job in some office somewhere, so what the hell do you know!?” Seth shouted at the man.

The man didn’t respond in a likewise anger. With a cool expression, he removed yet another cigarette from the carton in his pocket. “I’ve got no job like you.”

Seth looked back with some surprise but thought his words stung insincere. he drunkenly cursed him. “You stupid fucking liar! Where’d all that nice shit come from then, huh?” he asked referencing the clean suit and comely appearance.

“I was a farmer out west, came to the city to find work but found there wasn’t any to be had. I was like you: alone, desperate, and nowhere to go.”

Seth spat back, “Fuck you asshole.”

“I found a niche, a way to help others procure things,” he said with vagueness.

“What the hell are you talkin’ about? I want to know why you think you know me so damn well. Answer me!” Seth finished with a startling aggressiveness. He had grown tired of the man’s unwillingness to speak clearly.

“Calm down, I’m on your side,” the man pleaded. “I had nowhere to turn in this so-called civilized world. People spit on me like I was trash and called me names.”

“Well ain’t that sad,” said Seth sarcastically.

The man continued without even giving a pause to recognize the comment. “We always find ways, and my way was a dangerous one, albeit a profitable one. So I don’t have a job per se.”

Seth looked at the man and his casual demeanor. His cigarette had gone out halfway through, but he hadn’t made any effort to relight it; he just let it sit there as if it was an extra appendage hanging from those youthful lips of reddish purple. “You sound like one of them boys from around here. Ya know, those ones that bring all those oh so precious crates of hooch from across the border. If that’s the case sir, I salute you! Thanks for letting me get drunk,” Seth said half-serious and half-jokingly.

The man frowned readily at the comment and let the half burnt cigarette fall from his lips as he parted his lips to speak. Half burnt embers of ash and tobacco scattered like bits of debris in the wind with the force of the fall. “I’m one of them boys,” he said turning back to the mirror once finished. “Don’t wanna be either.”

Once again, Seth tried to force more information out. With a slur upon his tongue he asked, “Then what the hell are ya?”

The man looked into the mirror at his youthful face and tried to think of some type of answer that would fully portray the strange complexity that was his human character. Every time he saw his reflection, he kept thinking of the past that no longer related to him. There were only those bits of conviction and character that had survived the transition to the city as the realizations of cruelty set in. Who was he? A man, a fighter, a person trying to understand the poor fools that populated the bars: it no longer mattered much. Keeping his principle was all that mattered and the mere labels were just words, nothing more. Names and descriptions were simply methods to associate one’s face with a certain ideal, to separate mankind further along the lines of social stratification.

“A fighter whose time is coming,” he answered.

“Who you fightin’ against?” Seth drunkenly asked.

“The men that make it harder for people like you, like me,” he said trying to establish a sense of equality between the pair.

“Ain’t that some quality comradery right there: a homeless drunk and a criminal without a cause.” Seth shook his head and laughed aloud. “What a fucking time we live in.”

“Criminal is just a label,” the man said.

“A criminal’s a criminal, don’t matter –” His speech was interrupted by a cough and hiccup. The nauseating feeling started to increase. “Don’t matter how you tell it.”

“How about those men that don’t bother to help you, that look at you like you’re nothing, are they good men or are they criminals for not doing anything about it?” the man questioned with fluster and speed.

The lights and sounds in the speakeasy started to increase as the crowd continued to pour in from the door. A collection of black suits and colorful dresses passed by the counter and sat at tables, casting the somewhat serious conversation between the pair in a strange setting of laughing men and women. It was a scene that would have seemed rather light had it been the 1920s. However, a brief walk in against the brisk winds of the outside would remind everyone that the good times outside of the speakeasy had ended, that this bar was coated in the protective bubble of alcohol and time. It was a place seemingly stuck in the previous decade; all these bars were.

“I didn’t ask for help, didn’t want it,” said Seth.

“Something made you go to that soup line,” said the man.

“A hungry stomach,” he said grabbing at his belly. “You say there’s no shame in help. Well, there is. Going up to that goddamn line, I was throwing the white flag in the air, surrendering to the world. I lost.”

“And you’re gonna blame yourself for that, for wanting help?” asked the man.

“There’s a difference between wanting help and helping yourself.”

Seth watched as the bartender gracefully avoided tables in an effort to serve drinks across the room. He thought about having faith, about having the hope necessary to live. That’s how everyone did it; they simply accepted the things they couldn’t change and played the game. With

naivety, Seth continued to cling to his idea of hard work as an end solution to all, a solution he would keep faith in until the day of his death.

Seth proceeded with a final statement, the only statement he could recall in his exhaustive intoxication. “As my bartender friend said, have faith.”

His words fell upon the disbelieving ears; the man never understood how people clutched so readily onto the ideals that had failed them. But then again, it was hard to convince a man to think differently, to truly consider another aspect of their life when the world was stacked against you. To resist society’s edicts required the greatest conviction against the forceful eyes of the majority.

“Mr. Muller,” a deep voice boomed from behind the pair.

Seth took little notice as the man spoke; he was now focused on wiping off a small patch of dirt from his left breast pocket. The man turned rotated around fully in his chair to see who had called the formal name. Mr. Muller smiled as he recognized the tight face and darkened persona of his guest, a persona that matched the shadowy color of his skin. He stood with a disgruntled look of concern upon his mouth and beads of perspiration on his lighter brown brow. These details were difficult to discern to men seeing him for the first time. He hid it all in the shrouded secrecy of his oversized hat and jet black suit.

“Told you they’d let you in. Business is business no matter... appearances,” said Mr. Muller waving his hands about his guest when he said the word appearances.

“Sure, lovely place after all,” responded the man unamused by the comment and his attempts to be friendly.

At this point, Seth turned back in alarm at the man standing before him. His drunkenness would allow for anything to be slipped from his mouth. "A colored boy, didn't know they allowed your kind here," Seth said without thinking.

The new guest didn't respond, just stood there in the same disinterested manor. Mr. Muller interjected, "Money is money friend, no matter they be Negro or white."

Seth hiccupped again loudly and stumbled out of his chair to which he promptly laughed to. With a newfound sense of inebriation he stood up still wobbling back and forth. The African American shook his head at the man before him. Seth looked up at his tall figure and powerful build with admiration. He took particular notice of the various blemishes among his darkened skin, the marks of previous scars that had since healed. Along his neck ran a much deeper mark, a spot that had been repaired but was still visible to the examining eye.

"You look like one of them fightin' Negros!" said Seth with a giggle.

"Show some damn respect to the veteran," said Mr. Muller forcefully.

"A veteran!?" said Seth with surprise. "You mean like them military men in uniforms?"

The African American addressed Mr. Muller with a sheepish smile and his first name. "Trying to inspire the drunken masses, are we Carl?"

Mr. Muller looked on at his friend with a glance of irritation at the mentioning of his first name for he never liked it to be spoken out in public; made a habit of never speaking it in public out of secrecy. Seth spoke up with the renewed excitement of a detective that had solved a difficult case. "Carl, that's the name! It depends on where I stand you said! And now some damn

Negro comes up and says your name like its nothing. That is rich!" he said with an uproarious laugh that disturbed a few of the new patrons.

Carl Muller grabbed his navy blue hat and arose. He gripped hard on Seth's shoulder before pushing in his seat. The African American man stood and listened. "A name is nothing but a label friend." He readily placed the fedora upon his head, letting a few stray pieces of brown stick out from the sides. "A name is what you make of it."

As the pair walked away, Seth succumbed to the warm feeling in his gut and rest his heavy head on the cool porous countertop. He enjoyed feeling the rough craggy features against his face; it reminded him once again of home and the simpler times where money mattered less and prosperity wasn't a value to be equated with the progress of the human soul.

He whispered to himself as he lay there weak and disregarded by the masses of drinkers around him. "My time...here." His eyes began to close. "Faith in people... broken."

This was the pattern for a number of minutes: a stammer meaningless to the people that walked on by. In reality, these words were Seth trying to understand a new world, one that was colder and darker. He knew his time of dominance three years ago had ended. He was normal like everyone else, just a miserable backdrop to the people of this city; his name, a meaningless label to establish him as one of the poor. The bartender finally returned to his post, only to find Seth passed out on the counter, warm drool dripping slowly from his open mouth.

Chapter 6: Color

The darkness of his skin was the first thing that Carl always noticed about his friend, relaying a sort of mysteriousness about the man's character. Although Carl knew several details of his friend's life, he never felt he truly understood him. His sharp lines and built muscles were tainted by an aspect of blurriness, like a cloudy city mist dipping below the city's skyscrapers and cloaking the people below. Rather than the typical friendship one would expect, they were marked by the cool dissonance of acquaintances, their meetings a strange mixture of both pity and necessity.

They sat there silently at the heavy cast iron table, its surface rough and grainy. The man across from Carl sat there with the unhappy expression of a child. His African American colleague casually lifted a glass of whiskey up to his mouth and sipped away at the very top of the liquid that was starting to spill over the edges of the glass. Carl heard the microscopic splash of drops striking upon the table in a monotonous rhythm at nearly constant intervals.

"Why we meeting here if you're not gonna have a drink?" asked the man.

Carl leaned back and crossed his legs. "Still don't drink."

"Ain't that ironic," Robert said with a smile and another sip of his drink.

"This is the best place to meet, doesn't raise any suspicion," explained Carl.

Robert thinned his eyes exposing the wrinkles beginning to form. To Carl, he always had looked older than he actually was, but perhaps this was simply a sign of his experiences. "How is

meetin' here safe, eyes all over," responded Robert referencing the laughing crowds standing around them.

"They don't give a shit, just here to forget their troubles."

"Just like that poor fool at the bar," said Robert. "Always tryin' to convince people, make them see the light," he finished mockingly.

"Just tryin' to help," said Carl.

"Tryin' to find the paradise that can never be achieved." Robert threw his head back with the glass rim still touching his delicate lips. He gulped down the rest of his drink and replaced it to the table, its ice cubes diffracting the lights above into various faint lines of color. "I'm sure that drunk man's gonna join your crusade."

"He blames himself, won't see that his condition is the result of others greed," said Carl.

"Excuse me for not caring about others, about a drunken fool that's fascinated by colored people," he said dryly.

"Equality is a part of it, equality for all," answered Carl removing two cigarettes from the pocket of his jacket.

"I'll believe when I see it," he said grabbing hastily at the cigarette being offered. "When people like me aren't forced to fight in separate divisions from a white man," he finished with eyes full of animosity.

Carl's attempts to understand the race problem within American society only went so far, and thus that expected tension between the two existed. Carl wanted to end these injustices in a

radical political scheme, one that his father had taught him. Carl believed that a total overhaul of the American system could remove the plaguing stains left behind by the ruling classes, that is if the opportunities were given.

Robert didn't buy into this utopian idea, or at least he no longer did. Coming back from the Great War changed him, made him realize that the nation state wanted to forget all their old problems, and he was one of those problems. It didn't matter that he had fought alongside French troops and received the French Legion of Honor garnering the respect of his European comrades. That was Europe, and this was America where the fog of war hadn't threatened to damage the virgin soil; nothing changed. He lost faith, and now he set his eyes abroad, to the French soil he fought so hard for.

Carl leaned forward lighter in hand and a small flame grasping out at the warm air. Robert put his face close to the flame and let the white papers glow orange as they burned up into the atmosphere. After a brief sucking sound on the flimsy twig of tobacco, Robert spoke again. "Fixing mankind one person at a time, and we're always last."

A brief awkward silence followed the pair as the question of race hung there like some foul scent that wouldn't dissipate. Eventually, Carl resolved to move on towards more pressing matters. "How is he?"

"Beaten badly and stabbed," answered Robert.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"He'll recover, but it's gonna take a few months. Got a concussion and some broken bones," he said with a slight sadness upon his tongue.

Carl averted his eyes of shame from Robert. He always told himself no one would get hurt, that they'd be careful. Unfortunately, words meant little to the family. "Dammit," he said under his breath.

Robert continued, "He wasn't very talkative."

Carl looked back up at Robert in an attempt to refocus his efforts on how to repair their situation. "Did he say what happened? Did he tell them anything?"

"He said they've got some leads and we should be careful," said Robert turning his expression to one of resentment, "fucking sell out."

"Like you would have done any better, they tortured him," said Carl.

"Don't act like you understand. I was interrogated and didn't break," said Robert suddenly.

"You were a soldier. That was war."

"This is war," said Robert simply, "one that we've started."

Carl felt trapped by the family's daunting power structure and the city limits which they possessed. Despite this, perhaps out of morally driven anger, Carl chose them as a deserving target for theft. Unfortunately, imminent destruction now loomed over him. But he refused to break, didn't care if they were the underdogs. He wanted to show the world that corruption could be defeated, that poor didn't have to be exploited by those with the means to contain.

Carl glanced to Robert with a fire in his eyes. "We have to keep going."

Robert hoped the suggestion was a mere joke, but could see in Carl's face the marks of serious contemplation. "Keep going? Are you kidding me?" asked Robert in disbelief.

"I'm not giving up," said Carl with a newfound emphasis. "There's no other place where there's still money, especially with the way this past year has been."

"No, we need to regroup. If we don't we'll end up dead," he responded quickly.

"No one else is gonna get hurt," said Carl. "We'll play it safe."

Robert placed his fist down with force in moment of anger, an action that rattled the table's sturdy legs. Carl watched as his crinkled face continued to contort under the pressures of emotion. "No dammit, We are done. I've seen more death than you, actually witnessed men killing each other."

Carl didn't respond, just sat there uncomfortably watching the ice cubes glisten as they melted away. He wished his thoughts would follow suit, allow his concerns and worries to dissipate into the collective air above.

The flustered Robert straightened up his suit, the material in his black sleeves being slightly disturbed by his quick movements. "Look, we need to stop. There's a bad omen here. I felt it the moment I got that call from the hospital. It's the same feeling I had when I was over there – all that death and decay."

Carl refused to believe these superstitions. "Stop being paranoid," he demanded.

"I'm not jokin'. War changes you, makes you see things others don't."

Carl wasn't listening. He was preoccupied with the moments they had met, wondering if his friend had been any different then. Robert's father had been sharecropper, his grandfather the product of slavery. When Robert came back from the war, he expected something to change, the work to be different. Instead he toiled alone on the farm and found that the price of wheat fell fifty percent in two months. Corn hadn't fared much better. While he struggled to make ends meet, he had been terrorized by members of the community dressed in the stark white of the world they wished existed. A suspicious fire broke out and Robert took to the road in the search for a better life.

It wasn't to be found. Rather, he established a life of nothingness defined only by occasional bouts of anger and stealing to make ends meet. He got in trouble on more than one occasion, but was a child of luck. He ended up in Nebraska planting a few rows of corn and building himself a shack out of leftover wood and pieces of old metal. He continued to struggle while most living in the countryside ignored him as a symbol of American poverty.

Robert didn't have a home; Carl didn't have a home. Each of them were lost souls disillusioned with society's lies. This shared connection was one reason Carl offered Robert a job as a field hand on his farm, a job Robert felt lukewarm about despite his hardships. He had come back from the war to a failing farm and his mother's grave, images that added to Carl's sense of guilt. Carl found Robert beaten in his field, a victim of the travelling posse of white supremacists.

Robert's rheumy eyes spoke through their reddened corners and watery edges. Sadness was a bleak normality for him, and his mind had allowed it to seep slowly over years of undue racism. Carl had hoped he saved him, that he brought him back from the very edge of

disaster, but he never would hear the thank you he so desperately craved. Carl understood that the world they lived in made such gratefulness difficult, that their time together felt to Robert more of racial charity rather than one of true friendship.

“War changes, it just changes,” Robert spoke with a brittle nothingness, almost as if he was going to cry. He quickly wiped away at his tear-heavy eyes.

With the strength of an old promise, Carl tried to formulate an argument. “You fought a war for country, went out with the hopes of changing your image. But it didn’t do shit did it? All of them just looked past that pretty uniform of yours and noticed the color of your skin.”

Robert gripped harder at his fist in an effort to suffocate the anger that had built within. With a gulp, he responded with a stern, yet fierce, attitude. “I fought for respect and I won it, I won it for myself. And I realized I don’t need any fucking white boy to tell me if I’m worth somethin’ in this shit world of yours.”

Carl answered. “Bullshit, you didn’t get it, not even after getting shot at.”

“We fight to show what we can do, that we’re no different than the whole lot of em,” he said with a zealous intensity that was shadowed by the stomping feet of dancing couples and the malty scent of spilled beer.

“We meaning you?” asked Carl.

“We meaning *my people*,” he said. “No matter what you do, no matter how many people you try and save, we’re not going to be the same.”

Carl leaned forward to Robert and placed his hands flat onto the table so they were nearly touching. Robert looked down with some interest comparing the tones of their skin. He was a

darker black man with a true complexion of his ancestral roots. Carl's skin was that of the farmer, permanently shaded an amber brown caused by the constant roasting of the sun's rays.

"It's only color, a perception of control," said Carl.

"Color is color. We were born to see color. We were born to be different," said Robert.

"We weren't born to accept things blindly," said Carl.

"We were born to survive, nothing more," responded Robert.

Carl shook his head. "That's why we change it, improve it."

"And stealing is gonna make it all better? Then we can all live in paradise together," said Robert mockingly.

"Conventional methods haven't worked. Government doesn't work. Peace doesn't fucking work," he spurted with veracity. "A steady pressure: that's what works, the application of force."

"These guys are going to kill us," said Robert again. "Give up."

"I'm not done with this. I've already started this goddamn shit, I'm finishing it," said Carl forcing his fist down against the cool black metal.

"I told you this could happen," said Robert. Carl looked around at the ceiling fans populating the ceilings. He wondered if they had the ability to cool the intense heat he was now feeling, an artificial fever created by the stress of the moment. "I warned you of the consequences and now it's time to get out, plain and simple," he finished.

Carl lashed out at Robert rising slightly out of his chair. "This was your fucking idea in the first place." Carl's blue coattails trailed cautiously to the side revealing a rusty knife where one would have expected the leather holster of a gun.

"You wanted a solution to save your farm and your family. I gave you just that," Robert said. Carl sat back down in his uncomfortable chair disgruntled by the truths his friend spoke. Robert, with angry brows and a taut face, continued. "I got you the contacts you needed."

"Shut up," demanded Carl.

Robert saw Carl's frustrated expression and took sick joy in adding to it. "I always found it strange a man like you would get involved in such a shady enterprise, but I guess men will turn their back on anything for their family."

"I didn't turn my back on anything. I had no other choice. We were dying," he said with saddened eyes.

"You were poor; there's a difference."

"Is there?" Carl said tempering his volume.

Robert looked on past his fiery eyes with suspicion at the large groups of men behind him sucking away at dull glass rims and whispering silently to one another. Their gaze wandered to the black man sitting and would raise their drinks ever slightly to direct the attention of another. Robert hated the speakeasies on this side of town for that reason; there always were the representations of unacceptance and bigotry among those drunken furrowed faces.

Carl continued, "Being poor isn't something we can escape; it's assigned to us at birth. We're slaves, that's all they see us as, a pair of hands to do work and then be cast aside at a moment's notice."

A waitress came by and grabbed the empty glass, removing the multi-colored prism that had marked the table so cleanly. Her smile of deep red lipstick was directed towards Robert. He felt irritated by the notice, and thought it a mere sign of the white fakeness he had grown so accustomed to.

"I remember when I was little, my grandfather told me stories about working in the fields on a hot summer day, the master, a white boy of twenty, watching over the men. He talked about that white boy: how he would simply stand up there and direct all those poor fools where to pick those small balls of white growing on a bush, looking like clouds that had fallen from the sky."

Robert paused to gauge his colleague's reaction only to find one of pensive acceptance. Perhaps it was anger, evolved out of a sense that they were inherently different. Perhaps pity haunted him, the only emotion his white friend could try and comprehend when dealing with other races. To Robert, their ideas would be in a state of perpetual divorce, each man incapable of reaching the other's most hidden dogmas. Race had become a tall barrier, not because of the color of their skin but because of their cultures.

Robert continued. "He never did nothing to my grandpa. According to him, this white boy was strict, but kind to his slaves trying to avoid violence whenever necessary. This white boy was the nicest he said, had a sort of admiration for him so tall on his high horse and looking down to them like a shepherd. My grandpa thought of him like a fucking God for Christ's sake, a provider."

“Well time came for the war to end it all,” Robert said scratching at his throat. “Did he run away from that farm towards those federal troops. No, he ran the other right into the hands of the white boy and toiled for years, became one of them poor farmers that worked for goddamn nothing. He was stuck at that same damn farm where his daddy died and his daddy before him.”

Carl opened his mouth to speak, but found that nothing would come out. He had not the words or family history to suspend his friend’s story.

“That’s slavery, when you got nowhere to go and are forced to accept another man as your caretaker, as your fucking god. He was enslaved by generations of servitude, a mentality that doesn’t break down so easily,” Robert said.

“And going to war fixed that, fighting for the ancestors that enslaved your grandpa,” said Carl without any consideration to racial sensitivity.

Robert went on coolly explaining his reasons. “I went to war to prove to myself that I could do it, that I had the power to leave.” Robert pushed his thumb hard into his chest and spoke with both pride and anger. “I broke the pattern. I refused to be controlled.”

“Aren’t you hungry for more? Think of when you left, think of how it felt.” Carl considered his words carefully. “*Your race* can feel that feeling,” he said trading out “we” with “your race.”

“My race and my color is of my concern, not yours.”

“No matter what you think of me, we’re in the same boat. We need to stand together,” pleaded Carl.

Robert crossed his legs and laughed with a grunt. “You need my help to pull this thing off, that’s what I’m gettin’ here. You socialists all think you’re so goddamn noble when in the end there’s always a reason, always an angle.”

Carl’s attitude soured at this point in the conversation. Robert’s dissatisfaction with the white race was apparent, and Carl didn’t blame him. However, naïvely hoped that they could disregard these issues created by the great vanes of human history; he sought not an alliance based race, but class. Their time together had produced mere toleration, not the togetherness he had hoped for.

“Call me selfish, call me a goddamn racist; I don’t care what you call me cause I know what I am no matter what you think.”

“And what would that be Mr. Muller?” asked Robert.

Carl responded in earnest, “A fighter, and you are too. Don’t give up on that.”

Robert nodded his head and repeated the words without any indication of approval or disregard. “A fighter, a goddamn fighter.”

“Yes, you have a right to be suspicious. Life’s made you that way, but don’t look at me as another just another man. You don’t even need to look at me as a friend, or whatever the hell you might consider me. Look at me as one fighter talking to another, one man of change to another man of change.”

Robert looked around the room again now noticing the lights had slightly dimmed as the life in the bar blossomed. Swinging hips and black ties flew across the room in a clash of color and monochrome that only hinted further at the stressful differences between the two men: one

of hopeful belief and the other a realist. “Listen Carl, I feel for you, I really do. When my family had nothing, I would have done anything for them.”

Carl thought back to his family still out west on the decaying farm. They had been foreclosed upon the previous year and his wife had been forced to go looking for work in town, a desperate attempt that turned up little. He never asked whenever she came back home holding crumpled up bills with frazzled brown hair and a hickey on her neck. He’d just go into another room and watch his son play with a homemade wooden train. As he watched he would cry softly while rocking in an old chair. He didn’t feel anger towards his wife, but a heartbreaking shame that all he could do was farm and reap what little he could to sell in a town over, hoping to avoid the men’s expressions as he walked in on the main road, hoping to avoid any questions asking how Samantha was. There was nothing else they could do except hope, hope that the land would become arable again and that economic destruction would eventually lift its reigns.

Moments like these nearly destroyed Carl, pushed him to the edge until he finally snapped; decided he wouldn’t watch as his family’s life and purity slipped by his very eyes. He wrote to Robert, who had left for the city a few months earlier hoping to find greater prosperity along the coast. He received a response a few weeks later and was soon off on the rails to raise enough money for his family to live on. In a symbolic final notion of continued commitment to one another, Carl and his wife renewed their vows in a small ceremony, one that involved their young son. His wife looked at him with fearful green eyes of terror and whispered into his ear to be careful and that she loved him. He told her not to worry, that he’d send whatever money he could make back home and that he’d be safe, that he’d grown up in New York and could still remember the bright beacon of hope in his head. With tears in his eyes, he waved goodbye to his wife and small son from the train, now a hobo belonging to the tracks.

Except there was no job waiting for Carl back in the city. Robert had written back to him explaining that life in the city was just as cruel and harsh. He had found himself an area to live in the inner city, an area many labelled simply as “the slums” but that the conditions for everyone, especially blacks, were horrendous. Carl refused to give up and decided it was time for more drastic actions. After a few more letters and some help from Robert in addition to a few other contacts from his city days, he was ready to begin the operation. They met in the city and started to layout complex escape routes and the chains to move around stolen product safely. It had been working out well too, with hefty checks being sent back to his family in the mail and some money for himself to live on, that is until the most recent incident with Albert. He had only accumulated a portion of the money needed to save his livelihood, and now desperation had taken hold.

Carl thought his motivations dirty but pure at the same time. He acted out of love for family and even hoped change was in the air for other poor individuals. It was true; his family came first in his scheme. But he was determined to help others as well, as soon as the foreclosure could be paid off and his family cared for. It had been nine months since he had seen them and missed them dearly, but hoped he could gain enough to go back before Christmas. However, the encroaching violence upon his contacts made that increasingly unlikely.

He stared deep into the cracks that formed Robert’s face. “I would, and I will. I suggest one last job, a job that can allow us to end this little operation of ours.”

“And what makes you think we can pull it off, especially now that we have their attention?” Robert asked.

“We have their attention, but thsy’re not expectin’ nothing bigger. We hit them hard one last time and take in a big haul, something they won’t expect from the guys that have been taking things slowly,” Carl explained with newfound confidence.

“I don’t know, it’s a risky move,” said Robert removing a cigarette from his pocket.

“Think about it – you can finally have the money to leave this country in a month. A damn month! Never have to deal with any of this shit again, could be off in France enjoying the life of a European.”

Robert lit the cigarette and sucked down on the ash. For the first time in their conversation, his expression was one of contemplation rather than plain disinterest. “People are gonna die,” he said.

“No one has to,” said Carl. “We’ll be careful.”

Robert ashed his cigarette onto a puddle of water that had collected on the table. “And you already know the location in mind?” he asked.

“We know all the locations we’ve been hitting, but those are gonna be obvious targets now.”

Robert cut in. “We need a location that hasn’t been touched.”

“Exactly, but we just need to find the right man willing to point us in the right direction,” said Carl.

Robert rubbed at his chin in thought. “We’ve got to find a new buyer too, someone that redirect everything to other cities. Nobody is going to buy a large cache of stolen hooch. Too risky and too noticeable.”

“Selling’s been okay so far. Why not use the people we can trust?” asked Carl.

“No,” Robert said, “we need someone that has a support system in place, someone that can ship it all out to Chicago or some other riled up town.”

Carl rubbed at his lips. “Okay then, we’ve got our work cut out. Shouldn’t be difficult if we can find the right men.”

“We got to make a new list. Our guys have been compromised; they can’t be trusted anymore,” said Robert.

“So we just throw them to the curb?” asked Carl in anger.

Robert took an impressive drag and blew the smoke towards a passing by white man that had been staring at him earlier. “If necessary, yes, but hopefully it won’t come to that. We just got to find new assets.”

“We’ll check,” he said somewhat displeased with the answer.

“Officers can usually be bought for cheap,” said Robert pointing the cigarette to Carl.

“We’ll figure it out,” said Carl not enjoying the fact that they would have to reestablish new ties and break more rules in the process. He was still new to the world of crime and worked out of necessity, not out of desire or for a rush of adrenaline. He would need to prepare his mind for the task at hand, but found comfort in the fact that this would be their last.

“Oh and one other thing,” said Robert placing the still lit cigarette onto the table.

He brushed aside his suit coat and exposed twin holsters, one on the left and one on the right of his waist. In them sat weapons loosely, one an all-black pistol and the other a dull silver revolver with a brown handle. Robert looked around to make sure that they had the necessary privacy. After he was satisfied with his scan of the room he carefully grabbed the revolver and pushed it forward to Carl. Taking hold of Carl’s hands that were resting on the table, he placed them over the weapon so that others wouldn’t see.

“You’ll need this,” said Robert.

Carl shook his head, but kept the gun hidden beneath his hands. “I ain’t shooting someone.”

“I’ve seen you hunt. Your aims not bad and you’re gonna need it,” he said picking the cigarette up and replacing it to his lips. “And yes, you’re gonna actually carry a gun on you this time around.”

“I’ve told you’ I’m not going to kill anyone,” said Carl lowering his brows slightly.

“You know, it amazes me that a socialist, acting as a criminal, wanting to bring change, refuses to deal with the people that ruin his philosophy,” said Robert shaking his head. “Fucking amazing.”

“Haven’t needed one yet,” said Carl.

“You’ve had me to pull the trigger, been playing it safe. Well no more of that. This isn’t just taking a few crates and running for it. No, this is a whole damn shipment. expect the guns to be blazin’,” said Robert.

“I told you, I don’t fucking want it,” said Carl getting more agitated.

“I’ll say it again: someone’s gonna die. Now they know about our plans and they’re not gonna be just some stupid guards. No these are gonna be full-fledged members of the family out to get us and they’re not known for being merciful.”

“I’m not – ” started Carl before being interrupted by Robert.

“We’re not doing this until you take that weapon. The choice can be yours now: your life or your enemies, a simple one for most men to make.”

Carl lifted his hands and observed the many etches and dents that had marked the revolver. He was a good shot with a gun, learning to shoot at an early age and perfecting his skill out in the country. However, he saw the gun as a tool to get a job done; it was an object used to kill a coyote threatening the chickens or kill a menacing bear. He didn’t want to use it as a weapon, and didn’t wish to use it on any fellow man.

He gripped the worn down handle and pushed the barrel into his pocket. He could feel the cold metal through the thin material of his pants. “I’ll take it to shut you up, but don’t expect to see any use out of it.”

Robert threw down the burnt out cigarette and giggled. “So naïve.”

“We got a deal?” said Carl holding out his hand and exposing the pink calloused fingertips of a country life.

Robert hesitated momentarily before shooting out his hand willingly. “Deal,” he said in a deep voice exposing the lighter portions of skin within his palm.

“Then there’s work to be done friend,” said Carl following the handshake. “Talk to Johnson and ask if he knows anything about our new friends. I’ll see if I can get any information from Albert. Haven’t gotten a chance to see him yet.”

Both Robert and Carl stood from their seats and readjusted their coats. “Yessir,” said Robert mockingly with a slur in his voice. “I’m gonna check up on a lead I’ve got on an officer.” Robert placed his hat back upon his head.

“Who’s that?” asked Carl.

“Some cop who works with the family. Maybe I can persuade him for some answers,” said Robert.

“Don’t do anything with him without telling me,” he said. “I want to meet these men before we go forward. I want to know what we’re working with.”

They walked away from their table through a crowd of guests. A few men and woman shot disturbed glances towards the African American guest, while others started to whisper silently. Robert ignored them, only focused on escaping the increasing crowd that had collected. Their steps were somewhat muffled by the repetitive taps of dancing individuals and a small jazz band that started to play in the opposite corner. Both men had their missions in mind, and chose to ignore the intense rhythmic heat of the saxophone’s many notes.

In the midst of this escape, Carl stopped suddenly near the bar to find the man from earlier with his head lying on the table. He looked closer to realize that this was the man from earlier, now passed out on the counter. Robert looked to the man annoyed that Carl had stopped. Carl waved his hand getting the attention of the now constantly moving and elusive bar keep.

“Does he always do this?” asked Carl pointing to the drunken mess below.

“Son of a bitch Seth, you’re never gonna pay your goddamn tab,” he said throwing a towel over his shoulder and shaking his head in disgust.

Carl dug into his pocket for two ten dollar bills and handed them to the bartender. He looked at Carl with surprise. “What’s this for?” he asked.

“Put it towards his tab. He’s got enough sob stories to deal with,” Carl said.

The bartender looked at the bills with curiosity and then finally addressed Carl who had already begun walking away towards the door and was no longer listening. “Very generous sir, but,” he trailed off realizing Carl was already making an exit.

The bartender looked down again and continued to shake his head. “Seth, you really are a lucky bastard.” Seth snored loudly and let the drool drip further down the side of his cheek.

The two men walked up to the door and an employee pushed aside the heavy wooden obstacle so they could leave. After brief salutations, Carl and Robert were met with a cool blast of wintry air and buildings shrouded in the secrecy of early evening’s darkness. They stood outside for a moment before going opposite ways.

“I hope you enjoy paying for the drinks of a drunk fool without any respect for the black man,” said Robert shoving his hands deep into his coat pockets.

“He doesn’t know any better; nobody does,” said Carl.

“You really do have a sick faith in change. It’ll be your downfall one day... friend,” he said smiling slightly.

Carl smiled back. "Not yet, it won't," he said turning around. "Not yet."

So they walked, men of different calibers and skills, men of different beliefs and ideas. Each one had their points, but found themselves mired in the concepts of mutual understanding. But something brought them to this point, this same goal. Each faced off against the wild oppression of economic servitude; they were owned by a cruel and unjust system. They were joined together, yet divided by the flows of historical race, a division that would prove a near impossible difficulty in the end.

Chapter 7: Stains and Tears

Lawrence nervously tapped away at his leg with his right hand. He began to notice how rough and destroyed his old pair of pants truly was just from the momentary touch of his fingertips. The movement comforted him in the awkward moment of silence. His eyes forward, he watched the newspaper slowly go up and down with the rhythmic breathing of its holder. Suddenly, a voice spoke from behind the paper.

“In a sad turn of events, the body of Lucas Dresden was found on Saturday night in a nearby cabin along with that of his wife, Pamela Dresden. The police say the couple starved to death in a sad commentary on the economic ramifications of the greatest economic disaster in this country’s history,” the voice behind the paper spoke.

It continued, unwavering despite the sad nature of the story on the page. “Reports indicate that Lucas had been unemployed since the 1929 crash and that the couple had been living through the means of selling their various possessions. It would appear that they ran out of items to sell and rather than beg for charity, chose to starve themselves together in the woods.”

The paper was lowered and folded back up carefully exposing the face behind the voice. Dean was a man of large proportions. The outlines of his large biceps and massive chest could be seen through the thin white shirt and past the suspenders he wore. A few buttons on top exposed the bits of white chest hair, a surprising fact considering he was just a year older. They sleek black hair and terrifying grin had since aged, to points of graying and yellowing enamel.

He scratched at the very faint beard below his chin, also white. “What do you make of that my man?”

“I’m not sure what to make of it,” answered Lawrence finally removing his jacket and placing it on the back of his chair.

“It’s fucking stupid, that’s what it is,” he said placing his feet upon the large mahogany desk. Lawrence moved his chair back slightly to keep away from the large black shoes. “They could have begged on the streets or gone to one of them damn soup lines. It’s not the most glamorous thing to do, but hell, it’ll keep you alive.”

Lawrence looked around at the familiar, yet unfamiliar office. Each time he was in here, he would be having a discussion with Dean which made him usually disregard details out of the simple nervousness of dealing with a superior. The first time in this office, he noticed the light cream-colored walls that looked smooth to the touch, but were actually quite rough. After a few more visits, he noticed the pictures that hung up the walls: a variety of maps and old time photos of the city’s landmarks. None of them were hung evenly. The last thing Lawrence always came to notice was the clutter of items on that massive desk a desk, today hosting a slowly twirling desk fan fluttering a few stray papers.

“Some people are simply unwilling to accept help. Understandable if you’re not used to gettin’ it,” said Lawrence.

Dean took two crystal glasses and a matching decanter full of whiskey from a back shelf behind the desk. Letting the grip between his thumb and index finger loosen, he allowed the glasses to fall lazily in front of the pair with a loud smack. “Damn stupid way to act if you’re dying.”

Dean removed the cap of the decanter and filled each glass halfway with the transparent brown liquid. "I don't know, consider if you got everything and then in a single day, your whole life goes to hell. No job, no money, and no livelihood," responded Lawrence.

Dean eyed Lawrence curiously. Lawrence saw a slight fog in the left eye, perhaps the beginning formation of a cataract. "When you're faced with struggle, you got to do whatever to survive." He slid the glass forward to Lawrence and took a large gulp of his drink.

"Easier said than done, we're not animals Dean. We got principles and thoughts," said Lawrence.

"Yeah well, sometimes those things can get in the way of the core, what makes us people." He took another large gulp with already half of the liquid now consumed. With a lick at his dark lips, he continued. "The very ability to survive no matter what, the power to do what other animals can't: that's what makes us human."

Dean was a man immortalized in the tales of power. He was willing to pull strings no one else could. To him, there were simple principles of commanding power. Unlike Mark, he wielded this ability like a master. Other gangs tolerated it for the moment, not wishing to start an all-out war.

"Don't you find that a little simplistic?" asked Lawrence.

Dean answered, "What else is there to a man except his will to live?"

"His morality for a start, his ideals, his beliefs, religion," answered Lawrence.

"People take all those things so seriously, like they're made of fucking stone," said Dean.

Lawrence raised his right eyebrow. "Aren't they supposed to be."

"Ideas and beliefs are fluid, never staying the same for long. They're used to make men forget what is necessary in this dark world," answered Dean.

Lawrence watched as Dean fiddled with his glass, dipping his fingers slowly in and out of the remaining brown liquid as if to test its temperature. "Then what the hell do we got to fight for?"

Dean stood up from his chair and walked to the nearby window covered by blinds. He bent one of the metal pieces and peered carefully outside. Lawrence found that Dean did this at least once in every conversation they had, perhaps to feign an effort of thoughtfulness.

"That's why we got you around Lawrence. You're not like everyone else focused on the material gain." Dean retracted his index finger carefully letting the metal snap back to its original form. His eyes struck Lawrence with a new seriousness. "No, you've got the ideas that can be applied to the principles we value here: balance, power, and order."

Lawrence scratched at his hairline, considerably less white than Dean's. "Yeah, I suppose I do."

Dean returned to his seat and leaned forward, staring into Lawrence's eyes. "Your religious morality makes you a weapon of control."

"That's not why I believe in God," answered Lawrence.

"Then what reasons have you? Does it give you hope, reassurance against the world around you? Does it make you feel like something bigger than yourself?" Dean let a great smile

strike his face. He was like an older brother trying to label the beliefs of a younger sibling as foolish. “Whatever floats your boat friend.”

Lawrence rolled his eyes and tilted his head forward slightly. “Someone has to do his dirty work. Where his hands don’t extend, that’s where we take charge.”

“Interesting theory, and what work of his are we doing exactly,” Dean asked with somewhat menacing eyes, eyes that made Lawrence gulp before he responded.

“We’re the balancers in a corrupt world. We root out the problems spirituality’s not gonna fix,” he said.

“And you think violence is the answer?” asked Dean finishing up his drink and let his sparkling blue eyes pierce Lawrence’s mask of innocence. “You think God’s going to forgive you for all the pain you’ve caused?”

Lawrence responded casually. It was an answer he kept on the tip of his tongue, something he recited in his bathroom mirror to assure himself it was true. “We do what’s necessary, whether you see it as control or justice is in the eyes of whoever wields them. They are one in the same.”

Dean leaned back again in his flimsy chair causing the brown leather to crackle under the stress. He picked up his glass and started to flick away at the crystal rim casually making sharp clinking noises. “Control and justice one in the same, hmmm,” he said with his legs crossed. “I like it. It takes a real member to see the good we’re doing for this city, providing others with a product the government says isn’t allowed.”

Lawrence nodded his head with sadness, recognizing the painful truth of what had just been said. The killing was necessary, just like control and justice were necessary. They were a necessary part of landscape covering the rules of order. They were the true power, not the cops or the government bound by intricate technicalities. The family could operate behind this umbrella and work where other men cowered in fear.

“You and I: we have the power to change the world, restore the order that this economic destruction has created,” added Dean.

Lawrence suddenly noticed the light humming of music playing on a record player from the corner of the room, yet another detail he had failed to notice before. The soothing female lead and choppy trumpet blasts calmed his tense mind. “And selling alcohol is gonna save people? It’s gonna save that couple that starved to death?” asked Lawrence.

Dean placed his glass atop the picture of the happy couple that accompanied the story. Even on the page, he felt their piercing gaze ask the greatest question: why as the world going to hell? He folded his hands together feeling at the scarred knuckles that had struck others so many times. “We’re bringing back the world that we all loved, a time period that was forgotten by the foolish actions of politicians not knowing how to contain a crisis. Our organization doesn’t have to deal with the suits. We’re our own government working our own rules.”

“You can’t live in the past,” said Lawrence throwing back his glass, finishing off the rest of his whiskey with a cringe.

“You can bring back the same feelings, the same great moments where America was proud of its accomplishments. Now you got fools saying how America’s dead, how we’ve had our run, well I won’t have it,” he said placing his fist on the table.

“You can’t bring back prosperity overnight Dean. Give it time,” answered Lawrence.

“We’ve got to flex our muscles, make them see that those moments aren’t gone. The city’s going to rise again, you’ll see, cause power never dies,” Dean said stopping his rant.

“Power moves from one pair of hands to another. It’s only natural,” said Lawrence.

“That’s if you let it,” he said, “which we don’t have a problem with cause we’ve got people like you and Garret.”

He proceeded to slide open a drawer within his desk and toss a set of papers held together by a rusted clip onto the desk. The cursive ink could be read easily although the desk fan attempted to blow the sheets aside. Dean took the papers back into his right hand and coughed into his left trying to clear his throat.

“We talked to your man Leo,” said Dean.

“And?” asked Lawrence.

“Let’s just say he’s not very talkative unless you force the information,” he said looking away from the papers.

“I see,” said Lawrence not wanting to think about the bloody details behind such a confession. Unfortunately, he would still hear them later. Family members always liked to brag about their victims, despite their hidden guilt.

“He’d been trading locations for a small fee,” said Dean.

“Where’s our man holed up?” asked Lawrence quickly.

“He said he didn’t know, that he only saw him once a year ago. Since then, they’ve only had contact through letters.” Dean removed the top sheet of paper with cursive writing and placed it in front of Lawrence.

Lawrence read the penciled letter carefully. It was simply written and to the point, only describing where to find the shipment and the various guards skulking about the perimeter. It radiated its own sort of energy, as if the document had been forged out of painful desperation. With these feelings running through his veins, he ran his hand over the introduction: DEAR MR MULLER. He allowed the bits of lead to shade his fingerprints a light grey.

“Martin Muller, that’s our man,” said Lawrence nodding his head in a brief satisfaction.

“Afraid not,” said Dean.

Lawrence laid the letter carefully back upon the desk and curiously eyed the stack of papers Dean held in his hand. “What do you mean?”

Dean placed the stack back down and flipped around the documents before topping off his empty glass. Lawrence could see a small clipping in the corner; it was the portrait of an older gentlemen with short hair and a rough beard. His intense gaze was only masked by the tremendous smile that broke across his face and the joyous expressions of unfocused individuals behind him. A banner flew above their heads, a banner that read SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA, TIME TO UNITE! Lawrence was about to ask questions concerning the photo, but his eyes were drawn to the manila paper that the photo had been attached to. The single word DECEASED struck him with the bold blackness of a typewriter.

“When did he die?” asked Lawrence.

“Can’t you read?” said Dean annoyed.

Lawrence perused the document noting that his death had been at the hands of lung cancer. His death had occurred over a year ago, much too long ago for him to be directly involved in the theft of the illicit liquid. “What now?” asked Lawrence allowing Dean to explain.

“Flip to the next page,” said Dean casually sipping on his drink in a much slower fashion than before.

Lawrence was met with another picture, this time a larger landscape shot of individuals standing outside of a government building with various protest signs: END CORRUPTION, EQUALITY FOR ALL, and SLAVERY BUILDS REGRET to name the few that he could recognize against the blurry clash of hands and waves in the crowd. In the corners of the pictures appeared to be the sharp tips of bayonets making their presence known as if they were the regular aspects of any photo. Other men in uniform could be seen standing at the ready with rifles and clubs in case the event got out of hand.

He unclipped the picture found a dark mugshot hidden behind the larger photo previous. The man’s face was rough, cuts and bruises populating his cheeks and neck bone. Even in the drab monochrome, one could recognize the forlorn look of despair in his eyes. He scanned another sheet of paper finding its layout strange and unfamiliar; it wasn’t a typical police report. After looking through a description of physical features, he finally found the name in all capital letters: CARL MULLER.

“Where did you get this?” asked Lawrence still examining the strange features of the document.

“The FBI,” responded Dean taking another casual sip.

“How the hell did you get your hands on an FBI document?” asked Lawrence looking up.

“You’d be surprised at how little new agents get paid,” he said.

Lawrence shook his head and dove back into the text before him. “Not a smart idea.”

Dean spoke with agitation. “It’s not like I walked up right up to them and asked for the document.” He took a brief pause rocking back and forth in his chair. “No, I’ve been working my contacts carefully for months.”

Lawrence read the details again noticing this time some of the charges listed. Public disturbance, the promotion of violent disorder, and anarchy were a few of the words sloppily printed onto the page marked in dark ink slashes. “Carl Muller, huh?”

“That’s right, an entire family of fucking socialists,” said Dean bluntly.

The more Lawrence looked at the photo, the more it seemed to reflect his own pain and suffering. The man in the photo showed signs of physical abuse, but that was only part of the story. He felt a new energy possess him, a connection between the physical realm of the photo’s pupils and the emotionality of his given purpose as a violent accessory to God’s balanced will. He grew irritated that this connection was felt with a socialist, a man refusing to believe the reality of the world.

Lawrence turned the photo over in an attempt to forget the image, but found that its grip would not let go. The face, a corrupting source that made Lawrence question, needed to be destroyed. Dean sat there staring as a simple reminder, that he was a man of the family, a man of order.

“I assume you know more than that,” said Lawrence flicking the cover of his lighter back and forth with a brief snap.

Dean cleared his throat in preparation. “Martin Muller worked closely within the socialist party to organize events in the west with those of the east, became one of their big shots, a trustworthy man – even for a communist.”

“Carl’s his son?” he said.

“Adopted son, took him in when he was a kid on the street.” Dean said. “Easier to brainwash them when they’re young.”

Lawrence thought about his life before finding the family. When he ran away from home, he refused to help from everyone, convinced God was on his side and would forgive him for the crimes he committed because he had no choice. It was the family that allowed him to find a purpose, to apply these crimes towards the use of balance and order. He wondered if he could have turned out the same way if he were adopted.

Dean continued, “Carl followed right after his new caretaker. He became a member of the socialist party and was moving up the ranks.”

“What happened?” asked Carl. “What does the FBI want to do with him?”

Dean scratched at his hairline before answering, his striped suspenders pulled up at the brief movement of his arm. “One of their little protests turned violent. National Guard came in and dispersed them. They charged Mr. Muller with the items listed below.”

Lawrence continued to look to Dean. “Was he convicted?”

“Three months jail time, but the FBI is a very paranoid organization. They like to keep their files open.” Dean cradled his drink carefully in his hands like it was a small child. He looked to Lawrence with a mix of fear and sympathy, an unsurprising expression given Dean’s sometimes erratic nature. “You know, just in case,” he said with a grin.

“And you think he’s the one responsible?” asked Lawrence.

“It’s a good lead at the least. Could be one of his other commie friends,” said Dean. “But he should help us get to the bottom of this... situation.” He placed stress upon the final words with a cold suggestive dissonance, as if this word was something dark and forbidden.

Lawrence began to flip through the remaining documents in search of any clues that might lead them to their new target, Carl the socialist and his ring of “corrupted” friends. The FBI documents said little about his trail; simply that he was living in Nebraska following his arrest. There had to be a reason he left that peaceful life behind, no doubt economic ones considering the Depression.

“What else do you know?” asked Lawrence.

Dean’s desk phone rang shaking the loose papers on his desk. “I called in one of our friends to help us,” he said reaching for the phone twisting his shoulder back in the process. “Yes, I’ll deal with it a minute. No, not now dammit! Yes, yes, send him up,” he said hastily slamming the phone back down onto the cradle.

Lawrence smiled and continued to flick his lighter back and forth. “It’s what you always wanted, to be the big man dealing with all those exciting problems.”

Dean shook his head and grabbed his whiskey glass. He tilted it forward soaking up whatever brown liquid was left, letting the cold of the ice run carefully across his lips. "I swear all these goddamn idiots don't know how to make a decision on their own."

Dean placed his glass of ice cubes and diluted brown onto the back counter. He took hold of the decanter and presented it to Lawrence as if he was offering a gift to a king. Lawrence shook his head slightly and raised his hand refusing the request for more liquor. "It's all part of the game," Lawrence said re-shifting the position of his legs.

Dean sighed recalling the moments before being head of the family. "It's what I miss about the old days: being stuck in here instead of being out there causing one hell of a fright."

"Take pleasure friend, you've made it. And no one else can tell you what to do anymore. You always said you would make it to the top, your destiny I suppose," said Lawrence.

A loud knock on the door interrupted the pair. Dean ignored it briefly to answer Lawrence. "Ha, that was young foolishness there." He motioned to Lawrence to open the door. Lawrence sighed and stood up from his seat so he could grasp the handle and invite the man inside. Before the door swung open, Dean finished his speech trying to sound prophetic. "Life isn't about destiny; it's cause and effect. Actions lead to consequence, whether we like it or not."

Lawrence paused for a moment recalling the blank stares of people before their death. Those were the consequences of his choices, a collection of peaceful yet disturbing images haunting his mind, all blank, all white without the slightest detail. His life was a matter of cause and effect, a dangerous spiral of reflecting upon life's imminent mortality.

Lawrence opened the door with a deep breath and his calm expression immediately turned to one of dissatisfaction. A short man in black tie and jacket smelling of musty tobacco stood before him, his face jiggling slightly at the brief movements of the door. Lawrence finally let go of the handle and returned to his seat without any salutations, not interested in conversation with the corrupt lawman, Frank.

“Evening Dean, Mr. Woodall,” he said not bothering to take notice of Lawrence’s disinterest.

Lawrence responded without turning around; only a brief wave of his left hand while his right hand removed a stick of tobacco from his pocket. Dean responded with a menacing smile. “Well, if it isn’t one of the few useful lawmen in the city.”

Frank didn’t take much notice over the comment. His mind had but one focus: money and its obtainment. “So you need our help, again? We should get into this business of yours. Got more information than you guys.”

Frank entered into the office and shut the door. He leaned back against the picture-covered wall near the left corner of the room, carelessly causing an old framed photo to tilt further until it appeared out of place amongst the other pictures populating the wall. The image of Dean’s steady stance shifted right and his handshake shot upwards, creating a strange perspective.

Dean answered with a smile, “We work with what we have, and your department is always willing to lend us a hand.”

Frank yawned. “For a price.”

“Yes, always for a price,” added Lawrence who was now covering the playful flame of his lighter so it would reach the cigarette.

“Always so critical of my business,” said Frank directing his speech to Lawrence.

“Your business makes our lives easier Frank,” said Dean. “Do you have the information that was requested?”

Frank dug under his jacket and revealed a ball of paper. He unrumped it revealing a small sheet and held it above his head. “Five hundred should suffice.”

Dean and Lawrence looked at one another with amusement before looking back to Frank. “Three hundred like we’ve always discussed,” said Lawrence.

“I guess you don’t want the information that badly then,” responded Frank in the utmost seriousness.

“Shut the fuck up Frank! If you don’t like the numbers, come back later to talk about them. Don’t waste my fucking time now,” said Dean angrily.

Dean opened his desk drawer with the screeching noise of rubbing wood and gave a stack of clean bills to Lawrence who in turn presented them out to Frank. Frank, not in the mood for an argument and pressed for time, accepted the cash. He placed the money carefully into his jacket pocket before handing Lawrence the sheet of paper.

“You guys are going to have to play ball one of these days. It’s a business with varying prices you know,” said Frank.

“A business matter that involves discussion from both sides, not one,” said Dean.

Lawrence looked at the small sheet of paper. An address and a time were sloppily written in smudged pencil marks. “Not one for neatness Frank?” asked Lawrence.

“Not one for getting caught. Aspire to work quickly,” said Frank looking to Lawrence.

Lawrence eyed the information suspiciously; Frank’s information had never let him down before, but the possibility of inaccuracy was always there. It was that same questioning of ideals, the same nonchalant attitude towards morality. Men like this were hard to trust, their only concern being the next paycheck.

Frank spoke directly to Dean, ignoring Lawrence’s annoyed expression and continuing to lean casually against the wall with hands in pocket. “We’ve been gettin’ reports of a vehicle loading crates in and out of a small building in a park nearly outside the city limits.”

“And how do you know it belongs to the men we’re looking for?” asked Lawrence.

Frank looked backed to Lawrence in a direct address. “The plates on the car are registered to a Martin Muller.”

Lawrence’s eyes lit up slightly momentarily before returning to their dead and dull state. Dean rubbed his hands together contemplating how to deal with the situation. “It’s a good lead. Thanks Frank.”

“I’d work fast if I were you. Word around the department is that they’re putting together a raid for Thursday,” added Frank.

“This Thursday?” asked Lawrence with some concern.

“That’s right, you got a few days to act,” said Frank.

“You couldn’t tell us that information earlier,” said Dean with anger.

“It ain’t my fault. I don’t talk without change in my pocket,” answered Frank.

“Well then, good thing we know how to work quickly,” said Dean with a glance of agitation.

Frank ignored his expression looking directly to Lawrence instead. “Good luck Mr. Woodall in your search, changing the world one man at a time,” he finished giggling briefly before exiting through the office door with an inconsiderate slam. The now leaning picture moved slightly more to the left with the shaking reverberations of the door.

Lawrence turned his attentions back to Dean and his pensive expression. Although he claimed to miss the streets, this was his boss’s true passion, the world of information. His violence was the result of buying out people wholesale, making sure they offered a fair price for an advantage on the field. He strategized like a general, deciding which shops to send a message and which people needed to disappear. His methods became mixed over the years, replacing his typical modes of violence with more calm and collected measures, an indication of a more stable maturity that came with age.

“Looks like we’ve got three days,” said Dean.

Lawrence’s eyes continued to strain with irksome regret. “I don’t trust him,” he said placing an arcing motion upon his stiff face.

“You think I do?” answered Dean quickly.

“Why would you be paying him if you didn’t trust him?” pestered Lawrence.

Dean started to move various items around his desk in the effort to conduct trivial tasks and ignore the truth. “In our line of work, trust is something that’s hard to come by,” he said looking down upon his desk. “An expensive commodity if you will.”

Lawrence shook his head in disapproval. “You’re gonna get yourself killed one of these days, choosing the wrong people.”

Dean looked back up from his desk. “I don’t trust anyone – not even you – with the responsibilities of this empire.”

“Why would you?” said Lawrence laying his hands back carefully upon his lap. “Not your style.”

“It’s not about style; it’s in the security,” he responded.

“And I’m telling you that Frank is not a secure option,” said Lawrence leaning in to provide an aspect of emphasis. “He operates off whoever’s willing to pay the most.” Lawrence’s head shook with irritation, further causing his gray hairs to trail just below eye level.

“Frank’s got the most access out of anyone in his department.”

“I don’t know Dean, I just don’t know,” he said falling lazily back into his seat.

“You want to catch these bastards don’t you?”

“Not with unnecessary risks,” said Lawrence.

“I find this risk necessary,” said Dean. “We need to find these men as fast as possible. Delaying our attempts only shows that we’re willing to wait, that we’re willing to let these things happen.”

“So that’s what it comes down to then, you not wanting to look weak,” said Lawrence.

“It’s not about personal weakness or even personal gain, no,” responded Dean quickly.

“You of all people should know the reasons we operate the way we do.”

Dean removed himself again from the seat, his arthritic joints aching and his white hairs shedding in the sign of age. Finally, there was that look in his eyes: cold and distant offset with a milky complexion. Lawrence saw past his boss’s disguise of strength and power instead recognizing one’s own mortality. While others continued to revere him as some sort of mortal symbol, a man trying to display dominant physicality. Dean had yet to accept that time was the hardest truth, that this was the most domineering force of them all.

“We operate on an image, a belief that balance can be kept,” answered Lawrence.

Dean rested his hands carefully upon his thighs and sighed. “Yes, that’s one important aspect. But more importantly, we serve as a reminder to what the world really is, to who takes charge over the chaos.”

“You’re too headstrong. Acting like God will only burn you in the end,” Lawrence said.

“Ah yes, your fixation with God as the primary force, as the individual that can take control,” Dean said watching the clouds roll in.

Lawrence looked back to the wall of uneven pictures before answering. “I’m not asking you to believe in religion, but to simply respect it. No matter what you believe, there’s some type of force greater than you. Someone always makes the rules.” He paused for a moment looking back to Dean. “Frank is a man that has no respect for the rules, no code, no nothing.”

“Chance and power are the only two principles I care to believe in. What other members believe in is their own business, so as long as it serves the purpose of our syndicate. Those principles are what controls Frank, makes him the man willing to take the risks others won’t,” explained Dean.

“Bullshit,” said Lawrence, “Those things don’t apply to men nowadays. It’s not the same world it was a few years back. People are desperate and they act out of self-interest.”

“Such little faith in the common man. Surprising from a man of God,” said Dean with brief giggle.

“I’m a man of God, and a man embracing the reality of the present.”

“This Depression – as so many men have decided to mislabel it – is just a bump in the road. Sure people are desperate, but all it does is create a new set of circumstances. That’s where we come in,” he said raising his hands. “We make use of the times. We adapt to work alongside the continually changing principles of man.”

“The thing you’re mislabeling is man’s expectations to report to a higher power, our power. Times are changing. People don’t care anymore about who’s in control,” said Lawrence.

Lawrence stood up from his seat throwing his jacket carelessly over his shoulders and taking the hat in his left hand. He walked out towards the office door with the creaking of old floorboards muffling out the sound of drunken individuals outside. He turned around before opening the door in an ending address to his superior. “Someday you’ll see the error in your ways. You’ll learnt to respect the powers above rather than leave life’s games to chance.”

Dean crossed his arms and stared down to Lawrence's black coattails, seeming to float against the cold office air. They connected to the rest of his dirty jacket, covered in barely visible stains and small discreet tears. He remembered when Lawrence purchased the jacket years ago, a sort of celebratory item upon the completion of his first job. It brought a sadness to his mind, a reminder that they were now different people, one using physical presence to make a point while the other sat as a mere symbol. Stains and tears: the damaging description of both physical fabric and that of emotional compromise, words that would bring forth the description of torn relationships.

Lawrence took Dean's silence as an end to their. "Keep that in mind as a warning Dean, it's for your own good."

"Duly noted," he said simply.

Lawrence stared into the eyes of a man he once knew, a man he now associated with one word that left a bad taste: boss. He spoke from the open doorway. "Don't worry. Me and Garret will find them, we always do."

"Bring the new kid with you," added Dean.

Lawrence shot Dean a look of disgust before answering. "Great, just what we need. Another one with no experience."

"It's your job Lawrence, take it on with pride. Besides, I can't think of a better initiation," he finished.

"Be careful Dean, never know what Frank might do," said Lawrence still concerned as to their primary contact. "I don't want to take the new kid on some crazy adventure."

“Frank will be reminded. He knows what’s at stake,” said Dean.

Lawrence shook his head. Dean didn’t quite understand how circumstances could fore people into a corner, do things they would later regret. Lawrence would take the information he found carefully, find a way to expose Frank’s as a man of dollar bills.

“Take care of yourself,” he said before shutting the door.

“Good luck,” Dean answered as the door was being shut.

Lawrence walked out into the cream-colored hallway and took a deep breath. Another face to add, he thought hoping these men’s faces would finally materialize the cloudy images and provide him with a guilt-free relief from the consequences of murder. He went out into the cold city night with the thoughts collecting in his head, all those dead bodies covered in blood littering his psyche. Little did Lawrence know, the walls of his protective mind would soon collapse, and reveal the horrifying truth of the sins he had been forced to commit.

Chapter 8: The Crusades

Lawrence, Garret, and Mark peered through the cold glass of the automobile towards the freestanding shack about a quarter of a mile down the hill from the parking lot. Each man held a cigarette loosely in his mouth trying to focus on other tasks to pass the time; it had already been an hour and a half of watching various cars drive by on a faint dirt road. They would brake against the corners of the gradual curve, unsure as to the terrain and objects that were head of them.

An agitated and impatient Mark sitting in the back seat rolled his eyes and spoke. “What the hell are we waiting for again?”

“For the right time kid,” said Garret flicking the remainder of his cigarette out of the window and onto the cold dry ground with a dying spark.

Garret let his head fall back to the hard leather with a thud, his face cold and dull like that of the numerous homeless men sleeping outside. Lawrence chose to focus to shift his focus on the swaying branches of a nearby trees, one of the few green reminders suggesting their presence away from the city. Rather than screams and pleas, Lawrence’s ears were filled with a cool quiet of the park’s darkening beauty. Their car sat upon regularly hilly motions, a rickety sound of metal pushing back and forth against external gales.

“When are the commies supposed to be out?” asked Mark. “This their base of operations?”

“We’re not sure kid. Hopefully this little investigation of ours will turn up something,” said Lawrence.

“Wait, so we’re not even sure if they’re in there? What the fuck’s the point of that!” he said exasperated.

Lawrence responded with a calm ease. “Our sources told us this was the address of an upcoming raid. They have the same vehicle we’re looking for and they use the same supply lines.”

“How do we even know they’re gonna show up?” asked Mark.

Garret answered, “We’ve had eyes on the place all day. A number of men have been going in and out all day, moving crates into an old truck.”

“When were you planning on telling me these details? I should have a right to know what the hell’s going on,” he said with a sense of entitlement, the typical bravado of a criminal unused to any social hierarchy.

“You’re lucky you’re even here kid. If I had it my way, you’d be sitting on your ass guarding some dock for the night,” said Lawrence angrily looking back at Mark, who now wore an impartial frown and glazed eyes. “But Dean thought it’d be a great idea to bring you along for some fucking reason.”

“Don’t blame me dammit, I’d rather be sitting on my ass over there. It’d be better than this incessant waiting having to take commands from you,” Mark responded.

Garret sat up straight in his seat to address the youthful firebrand. Without turning an eye to the man he disregarded as a mere annoyance, he said, “If you want your time here to last, you’ll learn some goddamn respect. Men who don’t know how to follow orders and take hints will get the boot pretty quick.”

“Why should I have to follow all of these goddamn rules. Hell, if I was in charge things would be different,” Mark said looking towards the sliver of moon in the sky. “Oh yes, we’d use our power instead of hoard it.”

“It’s not hoarding it, it’s being careful and precise,” said Lawrence. “That’s the problem. You don’t think, don’t take time for any consideration.”

“I take consideration. My generation’s just a bit faster with it,” said Mark shifting from his seat poking his head forward in between the pair.

“Your generation’s cold and heartless,” said Lawrence.

“Isn’t that a good thing when committing a crime?” asked Mark.

“*Too* cold and *too* heartless,” added Garret. “Need to have a bit of understanding.”

“Ha!” laughed Mark aloud, “We’re criminals, why would that matter?”

“It does,” said Lawrence loudly. “Without any, you’re not capable of being human, not able to relate to anything.”

“You won’t be able to look a man in the eye, to be able to see why they do the things they do,” said Garret.

“You guys are too soft for my liking,” said Mark scratching away at his scalp. “I’ve killed men before, and without any remorse.”

Lawrence’s remembered when he believed the same thing about his mentor, that remorse was a tool of the weak. He found that God was the only thing that saved him from this cold dissonance, from the carelessness exhibited by their young recruit. Every single family member

started as an unprincipled bedlam, but the guilt would build, push him onto the same road as every person before him.

Lawrence's dark pupils returned to the boy now forced in between him and Garret. "Yep, don't feel nothing yet," Mark repeated.

"Don't worry kid, that'll change soon," said Garret who also understood a similar transition from guiltless violence to the apprehensive acceptance of sad truth. "Especially with the police more concerned with people in the city, you'll get your chance soon enough."

"That's right. You didn't like when I was about to chop off Albert's balls. You're not as heartless as you think," said Lawrence referring to the previous job a few days back.

Mark shook his head in disgust, allowing his combed hair to fall down disorderly. "You don't go for a man's balls, that's just a general rule."

"According to who?" asked Garret.

"I don't know... but just think of it: your manhood snipped off in a brief moment. All of a sudden, you're less of a person," said Mark.

Lawrence leaned over the steering wheel as to get a better view of the shack below. "And you call us soft."

"That ain't got nothing to do with being soft. Like I said, it's just a general understanding among men," reiterated Mark.

"We make use of whatever we can to make people talk, no matter how sick or twisted it may seem," said Garret truthfully.

Lawrence fell back to his seat. “We do things for answers, sacrifice a bit of ourselves each time.”

“What are you talking about sir?” he said addressing Lawrence’s superior position somewhat mockingly.

“We trade a bit of human innocence for an answer,” said Lawrence quietly.

Mark let himself fall backwards onto his seat, a gun and a dirty green handkerchief lying next to him on the vehicle’s upholstery. He eyed them with a momentary curiosity, wondering if he would finally kill tonight. Adrenaline-filled blood pulsed forward with the mere thoughts of violence, not yet understand the somber and serious attitude of men that worked with the family. If he lived past the dangerous initiations, he would learn that this excitement would eventually break him.

“Trading human innocence?” he questioned.

“You do things you’re not proud of in order to get the replies you’re lookin’ for,” explained Garret.

Lawrence added, “Every job you take kills a piece of you, until you’re nothin’ but a husk of who you were.”

“I won’t end up like that,” he said pointing at his chest. “I won’t let myself think of it and stay a cold-hearted killer.”

Lawrence laughed quietly while Garret placed his head carefully upon the palm of his hand supported by the thin sheet of glass on the car. Each of them recalled a past that was

similarly naïve, one in which they believed they were immune to the effects of crime's curse. That's how they all started out, and half of them left the organization broken and depressed.

Mark's great smile quickly turned into an exasperated expression of questioning and confusion, as if he had just finished intensive exercise. "What the hell's so funny?" he asked crossing his arms like an angry child.

"Kid, that's' what we all thought at one time. Me, Garret, hell even Dean once thought the same way you do now," Lawrence said rubbing away at some condensation that had started to form on the windshield. "Heard those words so many times."

Mark was adamant in his belief. "Fuck you, you'll see. I'll be the next big man for this family," he said with anger.

"You very well could be," said Lawrence. "Dean got his job cause he learned to disregard the pain, ignore the guilt. There's always someone with the guts to do that, but it ain't an easy decision to make."

"And first you best be actin' like a leader rather than some spoiled city kid," added Garret.

"I'll show the family a new attitude," said Mark to Garret.

"No one's gonna take you seriously with that sort of shitty act. We all got to cut the crap eventually and be who we really are," said Garret.

"What would that be?" asked Mark.

"A bunch of nobodys trying to forget," said Garret.

A brief silence fell upon the car as all three of the individuals contemplated death itself. How far away it always seemed even though they wore it on their holsters every day. Its glowing presence always shadowed over their group as the greatest tool at their disposal.

“Tell me Mark,” said Lawrence lighting up another cigarette, “what did you see in the faces of those men you killed?”

“Pain, what else would you see in the eyes of a man bleeding from a bullet’s wound?” said Mark tired of being lectured.

“Look in the face of the man you kill today – if it comes to that – and look at him deeply. You may feel nothin’, might be too early for you to notice much. You might seeing something when you’re cutting him down, taking away a bit of goodness from this world.”

“That’s where we think differently. I don’t see anything good in those stupid eyes. Those men I killed, they got nothin’ to be proud of,” responded Mark.

Garret and Lawrence nodded their head in approval. “Good,” said Garret, “the longer you believe that lie, the longer you’ll believe what we’re doing is fun.”

The group was distracted by the dim lights of a new vehicle coasting down the road. It flew into the curves with a rough engine and sputtering exhaust, loud enough to disturb the birds in the trees and send them flying towards the glowing iris of the moon. It sped along under the cover of darkness, unaware that people were watching through chilled windshield glass.

The vehicle braked hard upon reaching the shack, a rectangular structure with details obscured by the overbearing shade produced by maple and oak leaves above. The truck now sat adjacent to the shorter left wall while the two drivers appeared to be discussing something in the

vehicle's cab. Something moved in the vehicle's bed, a four-legged animal sniffing about the back.

While Lawrence and Mark squinted from their positions, Garret quickly fumbled between the seats. "Where the hell is it Lawrence?" he asked annoyed.

"Keep digging," said Lawrence with little reaction, his eyes preoccupied with staring out the window.

Finally, Garret's hands gripped the bumpy plastic of the item he was looking for and presented it in the air like a trophy. The pair of binoculars was small and black with dust and grime accumulated near the focusing wheel. Garret pushed the eyepiece hard against his eyes finding that the image was slightly fractured due to a cracked lens.

"Looking for birds Garret?" asked an amused Mark.

"Shut up," said Lawrence to Mark before readdressing Garret. "Anything unusual?"

"There's somethin' moving around in the back of their truck," he said adjusting the focus on the wheel and pushing the binoculars out further. "I think it's a dog," he said handing the binoculars to Lawrence.

Lawrence rolled down his window, the chilling wind entering the and giving him goosebumps. He threw out the large remnant of an unburnt cigarette before looking through the now magnified clean country air. He let the darkness and leafy trees shroud their operation in secrecy while he observed the cracked image of two men talking: one bald and the other with noticeably darker skin. He then let the magnified image move over the flatbed of the pickup

where, sure enough, the unmistakable ears and muzzle of a watchful German Shepard twitched with the brief movements of its head.

“Let me see!” Mark chided.

“Quiet,” whispered Lawrence.

The two men were discussing something, their hands rising and falling at various intervals in their conversations. Lawrence still struggled to decipher more details against the shadowed darkness, only being able to make out the faint shade of red and dots of rust marking the painted edges of the truck. After a minute and half of discussing the men left the vehicle as shadowed figures against the shack’s muddled background of brown and black.

“They’re getting out,” he said still looking, now squinting into the glass eyepiece.

“How many are there?” asked Garret.

“Only two, plus that dog,” said Lawrence.

“A dog?” questioned Mark with apprehension.

“Yes,” said Lawrence removing the binoculars briefly so he could rub his eyes, “A guard dog.”

Lawrence watched as one of the shadowy figures walked inside the structure with two canisters while the other went towards the back of the flatbed. The bald man was met by the playful dog’s yapping, to which the man scolded the animal. The German Shepard jumped out of the back once the man pulled back the rusting tailgate. He then led the dog to the front of the house where he tied its leash onto a post. Only after these steps were completed did the man sit

down on the front step to enjoy a cigarette. The dog used the full extension of the leash to sniff about the surrounding property.

“We’re not gonna kill the dog are we?” asked Mark.

Lawrence lowered his binoculars and finally handed them to Mark who speedily clutched onto the body of the device. “No, unless we can do it quietly. That animal’s gonna blow our cover pretty quick.” said Lawrence.

“One of em’ inside there?” asked Garret.

“Yes,” said Lawrence.

Mark handed the binoculars back to Garret who started to look down the hill again. “How we gonna get them?” asked Mark lifting his gun playfully.

“We’ll try and do this peacefully,” said Lawrence.

“Ah, another unexciting entrance,” said a resentful Mark quickly lowering his weapon back down.

“Going in there with a bunch of bullets isn’t gonna get us the information we need,” said Garret. “There’ll just be a bunch of bodies.”

“I want both of these guys alive, need to find out exactly who we’re dealing with,” said Lawrence rubbing the stubble under his chin. “We got to surround the shack.”

“Dog’s gonna make that difficult. It’ll know someone’s out there,” said Garret.

“I ain’t killing no dog; just not in my nature,” said Mark.

Garret looked back at the young boy puzzled. "So you've got a problem killin' a mut but not a man. That's fucked up kid."

Lawrence gulped nervously as Mark responded. "Fuck you, you got no right to judge."

Garret cracked his neck and peered back at Mark. "What happened to the cold-hearted killer?"

"Killing a dog ain't proving nuthin," said Mark.

Lawrence gulped nervously. He had grown tired with the bickering. "Enough. There ain't got to be any death on anyone's conscious as long as we got a good plan. Men from earlier told us they made use of two entrances, one in front, the other in back. Suggestions?" asked Lawrence looking around the cab.

"You already know my opinion," said Mark referring to a bloody conclusion.

"And it's a stupid one," said Garret quickly. "We should split up, some go from the back, some from the front."

"Doesn't address the issue idiot," interrupted Mark still at odds with Garret.

Garret ignored the comment as he fully formulated his plan. "Two of us go up front; that should distract the dog long enough for someone to slip in from the back. Take care of the man in there and we can surround him from out front and inside the shack before he even has a chance to react."

"I thought you wanted both of em alive?" questioned Mark.

“I didn’t say he needs to die, just *taken care of*. A gun to the head should suffice, or a punch to the side.” said Garret with emphasis.

Lawrence was agitated that Mark had to be with them for this sensitive assignment, didn’t believe he had the ability to take action quietly. No, he didn’t trust him to go inside. It would have to be one of the more experienced family members. “Alright,” said Lawrence. “You go out back and I’ll take Mark up front for some questioning.”

Garret answered, “Alright, but be ready in case things go wrong.”

Mark shot up again in between the pair. “I want to be the one to finds that son of a bitch.”

Garret looked back at him with wild eyes. “No way in hell kid. You’ll just fuck it up, ain’t got the experience to do this job carefully.”

Mark grabbed at his gun and shook his head with a grunt. “Eventually you guys are going have to start giving me some more important shit to do,” he said amidst an angry snarl.

Lawrence would use this opportunity to analyze Mark, try and make him understand further the code of the family and what it was all about. He didn’t yet fully trust him, didn’t see him as family material. He hoped this task might change that perception.

Lawrence shook the accumulated dust from his jacket and stepped out of the car. The rest followed under the limited glow of the moon above. They moved around, allowing the breeze to dilute any noise. While Garret and Mark continued to look down the hill at their target, Lawrence was more preoccupied with the leaves delicately waving in the wind and the occasional bird escaping the sinister looking branches. He wanted to keep staring at these images, so much softer on his mind.

They gathered around the open trunk and gawked at the several boxes of ammunition just barely visible. Lawrence loaded a new clip into his colt with a vicious click pushing another full one into his stretched belt buckle. Meanwhile Mark loaded six bullets into a revolver with his name sloppily etched into the handle, a weapon that had long served as his choice because it had killed the most men. He grabbed at a handful of bullets and placed them in his pocket so that there was the slight jingle of metal with every step he took. Garret decided to make use of a heavier weapon, a Remington pump-action shotgun specially modified with a larger clip and an iron sight. He added shells until it reached full capacity, placing a few extras in his pockets for added reassurance.

They walked together down the paved road on the opposite side of the hill, tall skyscrapers poking just above the thick line of trees. Lawrence and Garret continually pushed Mark behind them in the symbolic gesture of inequality. As he tried to walk in a horizontal line amongst the both of them, they would fall back into a triangular pattern. When Mark tried to return, the men would unconsciously return to a reverse formation.

They neared the bottom of the hill, trees and the darkness covering their movements. At this point, Lawrence and Mark broke away from Garret without a word and calmly progressed down the dirt road that branched off towards the small shack. Garret took to a nearby path and carefully traversed over a woody area towards the back of the structure. Slowly but silently he moved throughout the rough brush, the trees' heavy canopies cloaking his presence and the shotgun slung over his back in shadowy dimness. Reaching the back of the shack, he crouched cautiously at the woodland's edge and waited for an opportunity.

“Time to learn kid,” said Lawrence pushing the handgun loosely into his faded leather belt.

Mark continued to trail behind him, his steps hitting the dirt ground with greater pressure. The man from the shack watched the pair approach eerily. “What the hell we gonna do?” whispered Mark.

They approached closer so that every black spot on the shack’s exterior eventually came to the form windows, obscured by inner darkness and the only somewhat dim light from the man inside. The dog, its restful sleep disturbed, began to growl softly. “We’re just going up to ask some questions that’s all,” said Lawrence talking backwards to Mark.

The man stood up from the front step quickly, removing a holstered gun from his pocket. The dog’s growling increased as they approached ever closer, as they could be further perceived as a threat. “We’re just gonna walk up, what the hell?” whispered Mark.

“Relax, just follow my lead,” said Lawrence.

Finally, when they were fifty meters away from the structure, the dog jolted forward with several barking snarls. If not for the restraining rope leash, the dog’s bite would have taken hold. The choking collar did little to reverse the dog’s anger; perhaps it simply bothered him all the more. It was these noises and the dog’s uneasiness that made the man finally call out.

“That’s far enough!” he shouted above the dogs barking.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” asked Lawrence.

The man tugged on the dog’s leash in an attempt to silence it. “I don’t care what you want! Get the hell out of here!” he shouted still unable to hear anything.

The dog responded to the man's pulls and reverted to an aggressive growling and angry snarls, allowing Lawrence's words to finally be heard. "I asked what the hell you're doing out here?"

All of them stood in a small clearing created by the valley's gradual hills and preventing any larger trees from taking root. A few smaller ones, still large in overall diameter but short in height, clung on carefully within the open space. The moon, taking full precedence over the tall trees on gracing the shack's appearance, finally revealed some more details in the man's face. He proceeded forward cautiously so that he was twenty meters away, the dog continuing to growl slightly at the presence of unknown intruders. To Lawrence, the man appeared as the antagonist to a clean and natural scene, his purported socialist ways and beliefs a stain on the natural order taking place in the park.

The man brandished his weapon so they could see it, his bald head shining in the moonlight with any move. "None of your fucking business," he said.

"I believe it is. This here's a public park and thus the public's got a right to know what's going on. I'm one of those concerned citizens you see," responded Lawrence now walking ever closer to the nervous man, Mark following cautiously.

"I don't give a fuck if you're the goddamn president. Get out of here before I kill you and that friend of yours!" he shouted.

"Pleasant night, ain't it?" asked Lawrence getting even closer. The dog's volume increased.

The man raised his gun in a hurry finally establishing a line of comfort about fifteen meters away. “Don’t fucking move,” he shouted. “Throw any guns you’re carrying on the ground!”

Lawrence began to casually kick up clouds of dust around him, forcing Mark to distance himself slightly. Lawrence narrowed his eyes as he tried to analyze the man in front of him, the first man in a chain of inquiries. “Relax, I’m just messing with you,” responded Lawrence raising his tone.

“You got a fucking death wish?” asked the man angrily.

Lawrence watched the gun carefully. Its black figure seemed to float effortlessly without any movement whatsoever. The wielder’s hand was steady, an indication of the man’s sure grip and understanding of the situation. He didn’t shudder with his weapon like Albert did when holding a shotgun. It caused Lawrence to take prudence on the situation and make a careful stance. He looked at his surroundings; the few trees would make for acceptable cover should the bullets start flying.

“Calm down, we just have some questions,” said Lawrence leaning up against one of the bark faces. Mark observed the man’s movements, but restrained himself from grabbing the gun in his jacket out of fear that it would force the man to shoot.

“We don’t have anything to discuss.”

“The police have a right to discuss anything they see fit,” said Lawrence.

The man shifted back slightly and lowered the gun to his hip. “You ain’t a cop. Where’s your uniform?” he asked still not believing the story.

Lawrence was a master of producing this sort of anxiety among unsuspecting individuals. He hoped to use it as both distraction and leverage. Whenever faced with a pressing circumstance he would stall, try to provide himself the stint to create a new opportunity. Perhaps this was Lawrence's greatest weapon, not the clean pistol on his waist but the sense of fear he could instill in his enemies.

"Let's try this again," said Lawrence, "what are you doing out here?"

The man stood for a moment in silence, the only noise a low growling coming from the ground. "I'm not saying anything to some wannabe cop."

"Smells like gasoline," said Lawrence.

"What?"

"Smells like gasoline. Why would that be?" said Lawrence.

The man fell silent for a moment again before answering with the expression of fury written across his face. "I'm close to pulling the trigger. Knock it off!"

"Then do it," piped in Mark. Lawrence looked at him with an apathetic glance. "Pull the fucking trigger and see what happens."

"Don't test me boy," responded the man clenching his teeth.

"You want real trouble, then shoot officers of the law," said Mark.

"You're not fucking cops, now get the hell out of here!" he shouted.

Lawrence and Mark's expressions were tense, but patient. The man, on the other hand, presented the visceral attitude of a questioned witness. It appeared obvious that his raw emotional state was his primary weapon, perhaps a usual method to scare off the questioning suspects.

The man bent down to untie the dog's leash from the post, still watching the two individuals before him and pointing the gun at their general direction. With one hand, he unraveled the braided rope until he had enough to wrap around his wrist, the dog now in the full grips of its owner. He walked closer until the leash had some slack.

"Go boy," he said simply letting the dog rush the men with a full sprint and saliva gushing from its lips. Mark grew tense and grabbed for his weapon, but Lawrence was able to catch this quick movement before it was fully drawn. With his left arm, he pulled back on Mark's shoulders causing the pair to stumble backwards slightly. Mark looked at Lawrence with a crazed expression, still clutching onto the handle of his gun.

The vicious mongrel sprinted at them with full speed only to be choked by the restraining collar that kept him at bay. The animal still attempted to sink its yellowing canines into its targets, biting furiously and snarling into the air only a few meters away. He balanced on his two back legs allowing the thin metal pieces to cut deeper into his sore-covered neck. They continued to stand there undaunted by the dogs more imposing presence.

"That was a warning," explained the man tugging back on the leash so that the animal could be restrained. "Now get out of here, before I really do let him loose."

"Don't be stupid," said Lawrence.

“I’ll do whatever the hell I want,” said the man. “You’re the one trespassing here!”

A cracking noise suddenly echoed from the shack, a sound Lawrence could identify instantly as the pulsing shot of a much smaller firearm; it differed greatly from the dull booming of Garret’s shotgun. It was this sound, the herald of action, that brought about a bloody end to any situation. It was these moments, he believed, that defined men.

Lawrence had been told that time moves slower when under fire, that it was like some type of war and people would act out of the need to survive. He found that the only slow part was the few second exchange before the firefight. It was the decisions men made in this time frame that mattered. The cracking shot, a movement of steps, the mutt’s clamor: they were all factors that could lead to yet another trigger.

Lawrence took a breath, feeling the icy sensation tickle amongst his bones. As in any situation that didn’t go as planned, he simply had to stay calm and hope for the best. Mark had stayed relatively frozen, his only movement occasional glances between the men standing before him. In this case, his momentary flaw – an inability to act efficiently – had served the situation well. The man turned his head to look back at the shack, the gun and the dog still directed at Lawrence and Mark.

Suddenly, there came a response. A muffled boom followed by yet another shot. With deftly controlled hands Lawrence grabbed in his belt at the bulging pistol, directing the barrel towards the man still turning his attentions back to the pair in front of him. Lawrence aimed his gun carefully towards the man’s foot; he wanted to cause an incapacitating, none-life threatening injury.

With a terrorized yelp and a squirt of blood, the man rolled onto the ground dropping both his gun and the leash holding back the dog. But the bullet didn't enter his foot as planned; instead it's kinetic energy blasted through the Earth's crust and shook the ground where he had been standing. It was then that Lawrence saw out of the corner of his eye Mark's lifted pistol and its shaking barrel. The boy's racing mind had suddenly acted in a rash decision. Mark's bullet ran straight into the flesh above his arm pit, piercing a major artery in the process.

Mark jumped back surprised at the rapidity with which the events had transpired, the gushing blood and the sprinting animal lunging forward. Lawrence planned to shoot the animal after the man in a decisive one-two action, but his predictions were instead overtaken by the hands of youthful vigor. Now there was little he could do to stop the charging mutt. Having finally escaped, it jumped at Lawrence and dug its teeth into his forearm with crushing force.

"Son of a bitch!" wailed Lawrence falling backwards with the dog on top of him, his gun falling out of hand and into a cloud of moonlit dust.

"Shit!" yelled Mark taking out his handgun and pointing it towards the dog's head amidst the screams of pain from the fallen man and the volley of gunshots from within the structure.

"Shoot it, goddammit!" shouted Lawrence. The German Shepard took pleasure in its ability to cause both pain and chaos. It shook its head with vicious delight tearing further into Lawrence's skin. "Fucking dammit!" he swore trying to push off the dog's head with his free left hand.

"Move your head!" responded Mark trying to find an angle that wouldn't harm Lawrence.

Lawrence finally loosened the angry animal's strong grip by kicking it in the stomach, an attack that pushed the canine backwards with a sad bark. A "U" shaped tear in his arm jacket and a few reddened puncture marks oozing with red were now visible upon his arm, a sight that caused him inexpressible anger. However, he had little time to develop such feelings as the animal was quickly back on its feet readying yet another offensive charge with its large fangs.

Before it could leap forward, the sharp noise of death rang out. Its heavy body fell sideways to the ground with a tremendous thud, now drowning in a pool of its own blood. All of the animal's bestial rage was no match to the explosive force of man, pushed forward from the tool at the trivial task of a pulled trigger. Now it struggled to move as piece of lead lay buried into the animal's vertebrae.

Above the still body was the smoking barrel of a gun, and Mark's seemingly shocked and disturbed open mouthed expression. The animal whimpered slightly at the pain unable to move much besides the slight wavering of its feet.

"I... shot it," said Mark simply. "I shot the fucking dog." His eyes dipped slowly to the ground as an unavoidable expression of shame and regret hung onto his face.

Lawrence stared at the youngster for a moment with both empathy and rage until a cacophony of shattered glass and bullets brought his mental state back to the current situation. Holding his bloody arm, he retrieved his handgun and ran out to the man who was still writhing on the ground trying to take a hold of his dropped weapon. Lawrence kicked it out of reach and instructed Mark. "Put pressure on that wound. Make sure he doesn't bleed out on us."

Mark responded with a long frown and knelt next to the man. The man pushed back, an act to which Mark replied by taking hold of the man's left arm and placing it under his knee to

restrain him. He angrily brushed aside the man's blood-soaked hand exposing the gun wound. Mark quickly removed his jacket and pressed the soft stitched fabric onto the bloody mess. The blood passed through the loosely crumpled material and filled the cracks of Mark's hands with deep bronze rivers. As the man gave strident cries of pain, Mark grew angrier.

"I had to kill your fucking dog you stupid son of a bitch," he said pushing down harder causing even more blood to pulsate from the bullet hole. "Who the fuck wants to do that?!" he said looking into angry frightened eyes. The man tried to resist further, but found that his strength was insufficient given the life-threatening injury Lawrence had wanted to avoid.

Mark wondered if this intense rage came from having to kill an innocent animal or some relatively new emotion he had yet to experience; the possibility of failure. His head shook with intensity as he saw the blood flow, not wanting to watch the process of death happen before his eyes. He remembered what Lawrence said about looking a man in the eye when he died, but Mark only found great discomfort in this fact. He shied away, instead looking at the congealed cloth upon the man's chest; he tried to forget the haunting face and unsteady eyes.

Lawrence rushed onwards towards the structure from which the gunfight persisted. Having recovered his weapon, he awkwardly cocked it back with his injured arm only to be met with stinging pains from the bite. Fumes of smoke started to pour into the air, their source the lonely shack before them. He looked up to watch orange and yellow trickles gobbling up the roof of the building in a quick hateful fashion. It was a crackling fire that was spreading rapidly from its point of origin in the middle towards the two ends of the shack. In the heat of the flames, the volley of gunshots ceased causing Lawrence to wonder upon the fate of the men inside.

Lawrence suddenly remembered the canisters the man had brought into the building; this was no accidental fire but an act of arson, an attempt to destroy incriminating evidence. The aggressive flames had already started reached all portions of the shack, a great plume of black pouring from every window and polluting the night air with the scent of destruction. Lawrence imagined a burning man running from the shack in pain, his body, meeting an insignificant end.

In that moment, a shadowy figure kicked open the front door, coughing as he slipped forward. He fell throwing a half-burnt leather messenger bag and a shotgun onto the ground in front of him. Lawrence, still unable to identify the man through the smoke slung each item over his shoulder. He continued to hack wildly, but continuously tried to get up and rebalance his stance. Finally, the man emerged from the smoky shadows to reveal himself as none other than Garret. He stood back up, steadying himself with Lawrence's figure and continued to cough, feeling for the messenger bag which he had clearly fought hard for.

"What the hell happened?" asked Lawrence pulling Garret forward from the fire towards Mark and the bleeding man.

He covered his mouth and coughed loudly before answering. "He's... still..."

Before he could finish, a loud roar and bright lights sprung to life on the far side of the shack. It was then that the three men saw the truck's grill rumbling towards them. Lawrence fired a few rounds into the windshield before jumping out of the way, but it had little effect on the driver who charged through the barrage. They all were forced to scatter, Mark and Lawrence each firing fresh rounds at the truck's back window from the nearby tree cover. His tires narrowly avoided the bleeding man, throwing new dirt onto his bloody wounds.

Mark was the only one to try and run after the car on foot. He felt cheated and refused to accept defeat so easily. His youthful muscle strained against the now smoky air his lungs tried to absorb. Placing his hands on his knees and taking in the cleaner air farther from the shack, he watched as the pickup belched through patches of grass and onto the nearby asphalt road with the deafening squeal of burnt rubber.

Mark let the blood run hot from his heart to his trembling hands and sweating ears as he took to an unusual feeling, quite different from any others he had when committing a crime. He stood there for a moment trying to regulate the stressful quickening of his heart and to take account of the unaccustomed swiftness with which it all happened. He didn't feel the sense of power he had hoped for, rather feeling the burning angst of disappointment.

The ground marked in tire tracks and covered in brass casings became mere backdrops to the main focus: a structure engulfed in beautiful flames. Crackling wood and sparks flew peacefully onto the ground in a sputtering disintegration. Garret, now cast in a yellow-orange tinge walked about the area searching for any other clues and wiping away at his sweaty brow. Meanwhile, Lawrence held the bleeding man closely to him, almost as if it was his own child. The man breathed heavily, but his eyes continued to strain off into the night sky and towards the many sparkling eyes of God.

For Lawrence, death was a hauntingly familiar look. A look of innocence rode along the cool air and infected the men standing before him, each thinking cautiously about the end and when their time would come. The man's tenacity and threats mattered little in the end; it didn't stop a bullet from cutting into his chest. Now he lay there bleeding to death amongst strangers, a sad end to a seemingly volatile life.

“Garret,” called Lawrence. “What do you think?” he asked directing his gaze to the man already knowing the answer, but wishing for a different conclusion.

Garret walked over to the two men and bent down to examine the wound. As Lawrence removed his hand, a steady flow of red coalesced upon the victim’s arm, eventually dripping off of his body bronzing the dirt below. Garret licked his fingers and placed them upon the man’s neck feeling for the low reverberations of a dying heartbeat. “I don’t think he’s gonna make it,” said Garret after a momentary pause amidst continual heavy breaths.

Lawrence looked away from the man’s haunting stare before taking a sigh. It was yet another man to add to the list. “Fuck,” he said placing the nearly limp body upon the ground and walking away with hands placed upon his hips.

“We... we got one of them,” Mark stammered somewhat traumatized and nervous.

Lawrence turned around recomposing his posture and letting the smoky wind blow open his black jacket. It revealed a white shirt stained in splotchy red patches, reminiscent of a careless watercolor painting. Mark’s stern face eventually turned into a boyish smile, a simple act that drove Lawrence further to anger. Lawrence’s cheeks bellowed red as he thought more about the still bleeding dog bite, a permanent reminder of Mark’s mistakes.

“You took the shot early,” said Lawrence placing stress upon his wound.

“What?” asked Mark.

“I had him clear in my sights, a shot to the foot would have kept him alive,” he said pointing to the comatose body.

Mark finally looked at the man's eyes, their eyelids partially retracted. He looked like a man about to fall asleep, his blanket a pool of dried blood. Yet still, he refrained from looking closer. Rather, his focus shifted to defending his actions. "We got him, that's one less to deal with."

"And one less man to have a lead from," said Lawrence walking up to Mark imposing his aging frame upon the boy. "Simply said, you fucked up."

"I fucked up?!" he lashed out. "Why don't you blame fucking Garret, for getting shot at! I took quick action, more than you were gonna do!"

Garret gave an insulting glance from the tree which he was leaning against, still unable to speak due to his slow recovery from minor smoke inhalation. Lawrence's eyes lit up at this accusation. He pointed to Garret and continued to reprimand the youngster. "He did what he had to. But you, you were sloppy not taking any damn time to consider what might happen."

"I was sloppy because of Garret. I'm not taking the fucking blame here," said Mark backing up and pointing at himself with his thumb.

The tone of their conversation was strikingly low. Perhaps the recent action had caused a great fall in stress, a great release of anger. Lawrence knew however this was simply the buildup. He himself felt the anger building with every time he looked at Mark's clear coated eyes or felt the incomprehensible sting in his arm. For now, they talked against the destructive, yet taunting, flames in a mere projection of the rage building in each individual heart.

"You're to blame for this kid," said Lawrence holding up his arm.

"It was an accident. I decided to act quickly," said Mark.

“And look where that fucking got you,” said Lawrence. He approached Mark slowly. “If Dean didn’t care, I’d kick your ass out now. Fucking useless,” said Lawrence walking away.

Something within him, maybe feeling the eyes of death clearly upon him, caused a sense of regret to set in. He reacted strongly, fighting stifling feelings of regret and despair he couldn’t quite comprehend. From these emotions, his voice cut.

“Give me a fucking break! Like I said, I’m one for taking action,” said Mark rising his eyebrows at the end of the sentence.

“When you’re with us, you think shit through. With us, you need to fucking think! There are people behind you now. It’s not all about your goddamn self,” scolded Lawrence.

“Who the fuck cares?” answered Mark loudly. “We’re criminals and all these rules mean nothing!”

“With time you’ll see different. You’ll learn to take responsibility for your fuck ups and then you’ll see the way it works,” said Lawrence walking away to check on Garret.

“And what if I don’t give a fuck about all these goddamn rules?!” shouted Mark. Lawrence stopped walking and listened. “What if I don’t care about people? I only care about myself! Myself goddammit!”

Lawrence thought about Mark’s sad expression and what he said when the dog fell to the ground. He remembered those simple words of truth fall upon his ears: I shot it. Those words Mark, made him care. But Mark didn’t want to take responsibility, feared this concept that was larger larger than himself. People like Mark lived in tales of sadness, of regret, of carelessness

without looking in at themselves. In the end, they would realize they were as shitty as the whole lot, rebels unknowingly fighting a war they knew nothing about.

Without turning around Lawrence spoke. “If you don’t care about anybody besides yourself, then why are you standing here armed against men we told you were enemies. You didn’t question what we said. You just agreed and killed a man because of it.”

He walked over to the man’s body and kicked it slightly with his foot before looking back to Mark, his cheeks swollen with vibrant rage. “You could have shot us on the spot, killed us before we even knew what was happening. But you chose instead to listen to men you knew almost nothing about. Something made you do that. Whether you like it or not, you found a purpose in killing,” said Lawrence pushing ever harder on his arm.

“That’s a load of bullshit and you know it,” said Mark.

“What isn’t bullshit? What we say could mean nothing or everything. That’s up to you. It’s all bullshit in the end – every last piece of what we think complete nonsense,” said Lawrence walking around the now dead man’s body.

“Then why the fuck are you here?” asked Mark.

“I chose to make something out of the nonsense, create something that gives a reason to the chaos. I suggest you do the same,” said Lawrence.

“I’ve got my reasons, and I don’t need new ones,” replied a still angry Mark.

“You’re a fucking piece of shit, you know that kid,” said Garret amidst his heaving breaths. “There better be more to you than dollar signs.”

Lawrence turning around again to the chaotic aftermath of brass shells and alit wood.

“We ain’t got no use for a man looking to get rich.”

“All of you done yet tryin’ to persuade me?” asked Mark.

“Just think shit through and take some goddamn responsibility for what you do before we have some real problems. Now, get to fucking work,” finished Lawrence.

All three of them proceeded to clean up the scene, throwing casings and shells into the still burning fire. Their goal, to leave behind nothing for the cops. Frank had made sure that cops wouldn’t be close by, but it mattered little; they were far from the nearest station. Come morning and the entire scene would be a smoldering pile of ash, a few men trying to identify the desiccated remains of a burnt body.

Garret checked on the bald man, his pulse now nearly nonexistent. After checking the pockets for any valuable items, he called Mark. “Come on kid, you pull the trigger, you do the clean-up.”

Mark walked cautiously over to the corpse, his cheeks and lips noticeably less colored in their decomposing state. His hands were curled towards the dirt, in a final fight against the intense loss of blood. Mark finally searched the body, a mess of decaying arms and the wretched spirit of a dead man’s soul. It tormented him further with that same annoying spark of emotional depravity.

They lifted the body by its appendages, allowing the torso and chest to fall in a concave shape between them. Garret and Mark looked at one another with hateful distrusting eyes as they

walked, each hating what they saw in the other. Garret saw a bit of himself, remembering again why Mark was among them, that their responsibility was to teach.

The heated combustion of wood and fury heated the trio, gracing the living pair with a sweaty brow and dripping forehead while rising the dead body's cold temperature. Amidst the smoke they coughed aloud swinging the body back and forth trying to gain enough momentum to throw the man's corpse into the scalding blaze. Their muscles groaned and the dead man's glance wobbled with the gentle movements of his head. Finally, the pair gathered enough energy for the throw and released the body to the fire. It fell onto a pile of fiery ash before being taken over by a heated vengeance. They retreated from the fire, their arms burnt and their lungs filled with poisonous fumes.

The body was soon buried by falling wood beams and bits of hot metal. "Take responsibility when you're done," reemphasized Garret walking away. "Take some fucking responsibility."

"I didn't join to be some goddamn clean up boy," he said. Garret ignored the remarks, more concerned with a rapid clean up and leaving the area before any authorities arrived on the scene.

They approached Lawrence who now closely examined the contents of the messenger bag. He was met with a collection of bold typewritten letters, somewhat skewed and marked with black ink. Some of the sheets' edges had been charred black while others were half burnt rendering their information clumsy and useless. He lowered the sheets and rubbed at his eyes with dirty hands, his face stinging as he accidental applied dirt and grease. It caused him to recall all of the pain in his body, chiefly the stinging dog bite.

“What happened in there?” asked Lawrence once again.

“He fucked up, and that caused me to fuck up!” blurted Mark.

“Shut your mouth!” yelled Lawrence redirecting his speech to Garret.

Garret grabbed hastily at the front pocket where a lone cigarette had since fallen out. With nerves still frazzled, he wished to inhale the calming cancerous smoke. “Someone was there alright, pouring gas on everything. They were trying to cover their tracks.”

“And this bag?” Lawrence asked holding it up by a tearing brown strap.

“I got what I could, but there wasn’t much I could do. He had everything ready to go.”

“How the fuck did you miss him?” asked Mark. “Wasn’t he just standing there?”

Garret stared down Mark with an angry infectiousness. “It was dark and the goal was to keep him alive. He lit the gas when I was finally getting close, thought I couldn’t get him, tricky bastard.”

“You got what you could. There’s got to be something in here that’ll help us,” said Lawrence on a note of ungrounded positivity. “Good work.”

“Oh yes, good work for the man that started the fucking fight,” said an aggravated Mark exploring the realms of his pockets and roughly kicking at the tire tracks in the ground. “Fucking bullshit.”

“At least he tried to get something for us to work with. You could learn a lot from him you know,” said Lawrence.

Garret turned his attentions back to Lawrence. "I grabbed that burning bag and shoved whatever papers were lying around, but there wasn't much left behind."

Lawrence lifted the sheets again blocking his face under a pile of information and the plain black hat. He winced again as he continued to cope with the gnawing ache in his arm. It felt as if the dog's bite was somehow getting deeper with every second of non-treatment.

His eyes scanned through the documents seeing a twenty-dollar payment here and a four-hundred dollar cost here illuminating upon the financial extent behind their operation. Most of them appeared to be coded in a mask of abbreviations and indecipherable letters, something unusual for a regular criminal.

He shuffled the papers back and forth until his eyes caught a promising lead. On the very top of one sheet was listed the simple word in all capitals and bolded "SALES" followed by a slurry of handwritten addresses, one of the few documents not written in code. With a grin, he shoved the paper back into the bag.

The area appeared secure, despite the potential for the burning fire to garner attention, it's fuel source incriminating papers, rotten wood, and a guilty man. The moonlight had since abandoned the scene hiding behind a thick screen of graying clouds, as if God's presence had deserted them whole heartily in the mere witness of violence's shadow. Rubbing away the ashen cover of dirt and dust polluting his face, Garret broke away from their presence and redirected their focus to the final body, that of an animal. Mark's eyes grew wide at the realization that he would have to witness yet another sad factor of death's disgrace.

The three converged over the dog's body, all believing it to have died some time ago due to an immeasurable loss of blood, Mark more disturbed than the rest. Instead of his cold distant

eyes, there was a sort of warmth and sympathy to them as he stood there with a gun still swinging from his hips, the gun that was responsible for so much dissolution. It was a glance they knew well, the first signs of guilt; a sign not for the killing of man, but the elimination of another species that seemed to understand so little of mankind's chaotic behavior.

"It's all you kid," said Garret.

"Why's it all me. I don't want to have to deal with this shit," he responded.

The low groaning of fatality soon interrupted the exchange. Its low cry sent a chill down their spines, as if a ghost had made its presence known. Lawrence and Garret already knew the source of such a noise, but Mark still held hopes that it somehow stemmed from another location.

Mark's eyes shot downward to witness the blinking eyes and the rhythmic motion of struggling lungs. The animal hadn't the good fortune to die in the last thirty minutes of violence. Instead it clung on, hoping that sweet life's breath would return. Instead, it allowed life to prevail, to teach Mark a lesson on the potential for loss.

"Take responsibility," said Garret to a distracted Mark.

Mark's head shook quickly hoping that this motion would somehow save him, that a simple moving of the head could minimize his role in the animal's death. The feelings he felt, the unexplained emotions of before rushed back in a seething wave. His glimpse finally returned to Garret. "What?" Mark asked.

"You take responsibility," he repeated, "*until the end.*"

Mark's flabbergasted expression was one of lonely refusal against the laws set forth before him. Lawrence knew the young boy wished to do nothing, but he would make him act. In

a sort of sick way, he wanted the boy to suffer as he watched the dog die under his own hands. Lawrence, still holding onto his anger, thought that he would gain something more by witnessing more death.

However, Lawrence knew the anger to just be a mere screen for the truth. He wanted to see more in the endless darkness of Mark's soul. He wanted to prove that there was more in his heart than cold negligence. He wanted to prove to him that there was an aspect of humility, a sentiment that could be used as leverage in their quest to corrupt him. Lawrence found a point of possession, and like a demon, he would take control.

"I'm not finishing this god dammit, I didn't even want to be the one to shoot the dog," said Mark.

"It doesn't matter what you wanted to do. You did it," said Garret.

"Fuck you guys, I didn't sign up for this shit," he talked back his tone seemingly less angered and more worried than before.

"You signed up to do what you're told. You want a piece of the action, you want some of the profit, then you do as you're told," said Lawrence.

Mark's eyes flew away from the dying animal, not wishing to see the motions in its lungs or the congealed blood. It was hard to think of its earlier aggressive manner when it laid in such a decrepit state. All notions of bestial rage were replaced with a depressing four-legged carcass of decay.

“You just killed a man, but you won’t finish off a fucking dog,” said Garret. “What’s wrong with you?” Lawrence gritted his teeth at the comment trying to remember his dark past again and all the people who were gone.

“The dog ain’t done nothing wrong. It was just an unfortunate casualty,” said Mark.

The image of the dying deer was kept fresh in Lawrence’s mind. The inability to act in that moment years earlier was one of the few moments that stuck with him, one of the few moments that was detailed so accurately it frightened him. Now another opportunity presented itself. There was a way for the young gun to kill off the memories he would eventually have.

“Don’t leave it to suffer. Show some mercy. Prove you have the ability to finish what you started,” said Lawrence.

“I ain’t gonna do it, okay. Already have enough blood on my hands for the day,” he responded.

“God dammit, just do it!” reprimanded Garret.

“We’re not asking,” added Lawrence holding out his gun. “We’re telling you to do something on behalf of the family.”

“Consider it your initiation,” said Garret.

“By executing a fucking dog, not proving much there,” responded Mark finding himself increasingly anxious and paranoid.

“Do it, prove you have what it takes to kill. Do it and we’ll forget about what happened here tonight,” finished Lawrence still holding out the weapon. Lawrence felt powerful, like he could control the young man with every simple word.

Mark studied the gun’s intricate details before observing the crackling features of Lawrence’s face. Sweat ran down from his forehead to his emotionless lips. In his mind, he saw what needed to be done, what was necessary to curb that violent enthusiasm of murderous rampage. Such an action would make the boy think, truly consider what was at stake when joining the family. After it the possession would be complete, a possession made possible by God.

“What’s the big deal, let’s just get out of here already,” said Mark trying to back away from the situation before him.

“You’re gonna be forced to kill when you don’t want to. You’ll even have to sacrifice a few friends along the way,” said Garret. “That burning you feel in your stomach, that guilt you feel now...”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” interrupted Mark.

Garret continued, “Cut the crap. We all suffer for what we’ve done.”

“What’s it gonna be kid? You got a choice, spend the rest of your life being a petty nobody, or be part of something bigger and do what’s necessary in this world,” said Lawrence with strained eyes. “Prove to us we didn’t make a mistake.”

Mark felt cornered by his mentors, forced to take the only option available to keep his honor still intact. He felt incensed, angry about something he couldn’t understand. They had

used his brash attitude against him. Stress set in, he knew himself to be an executioner, a murderer in the name of something larger. He was pressed to the stressful breaking point of emotion, something God laughed at above.

“Fine, just to shut up you pieces of shit,” he said grabbing the pistol out of Lawrence’s hand.

Both watched closely as Mark pushed the pistol close to the dog’s head and took a deep breath. He watched as the dog’s eyes rotate, curious as to what was happening. His heart beat fiercely in his chest as he thought about the sheer simplicity in killing another man, but not another dog. His palms sweated and he looked back to Lawrence only to find him nodding in agreement, tipping his hat slightly to the corrupted boy in front of him.

However, it wasn’t over with a smoking barrel and the loud snap of a pierced skull. Rather, the dog gave a loud squeal and its eyes shot upward. All of a sudden, he was met with the darkening pupils of a dying breed. He didn’t shoot, couldn’t shoot; instead, he became lost in a great sea of troubles brought on by the endless stare of the innocent expression. He felt destruction, fear, and rage; he felt purity, bravery, and happiness. He felt the very essence of contradiction in who he was to become.

This exchange was brief, only a few seconds of recognition, but it was enough to make the young gun falter in his task. His hand shook and sweat overtook his forehead in a drenching of salty liquid. He stopped unaware that an aspect of human conscience resisted his criminality, crippled him with emotional nothingness. He became disturbed and lowered the gun, embarrassed as to his own failure.

“Do it,” commanded Lawrence. “Do it now.”

“I... I don’t want to,” stammered Mark. He felt like a child again, every ounce of corruption suddenly gone.

Lawrence took pleasure in the boy’s hesitance, glad to see it exhibited an understanding for life, an ability to show remorse when delivering a deathly sentence. However, most importantly it showed a human weakness all men had, a weakness Lawrence would take advantage of for the exploitation of the family’s purpose.

“You’ve killed men before,” said Lawrence. “How’s this any different?”

“It’s not,” lied Mark.

“Then prove it,” said Lawrence with a gritty smile.

Lawrence saw something more in Mark than a young man trying to prove himself. He saw a criminal questioning himself in the eyes of God’s light. He saw himself in Mark. He saw himself on a lonely road having to shoot an innocent deer. Only this time it would all play out differently: Lawrence would save Mark from his own mistakes. Showing a flawed mercy for the animal meant further suffering. Lawrence wouldn’t let him do the same. He saw himself as a dark demon of control, a sick angel of god, an outward force of the world’s destructive savior.

Mark pushed the gun against the dog’s head again, back against the temple, the animal responding with a sad whine. Mark tried to remember what the dying man’s eyes looked like, but found that he couldn’t. It brought a fury to his heart, a fury that most would attribute to guilt, but Mark had yet to understand. His mind raced and he paused again.

“Come on kid,” said Garret.

“Pull the trigger now,” commanded Lawrence with far more force.

Mark tried to interject, "I..."

"Now!" yelled Lawrence.

Mark felt time slowing around him as the pinging buzz travelled throughout the air, echoing about the trees with a steady pace. The first thing he noticed was a rush of warm on his face, the horrific splatter of blood covering his cheeks. The dog's head fell to the ground, its loose neck bobbling before it gave way. Mark saw how the eyes flashed open widely with the pulsing shot, only to close permanently instants later. It was the first face he would be able to recall, not the man's but the dog's.

All of a sudden, none of it made much sense. His life, his bid for the family, his very mind had been controlled at the hands of an outward force. It was a fore he couldn't identify as good or evil. Was it God that made him think of this? Was it the devil that sent his mind from the quick tenacity of rage to the pinnacle of regret? He saw himself in a different garb, fighting under the cross of God. He saw himself cutting away at the heads of non-believers in the raid of Jerusalem. History fell before his eyes in the flashing swords of the crusades, men killing each other in an act of hypocrisy, in an act of God.

Then, he was back. He was himself, looking back down upon the dog's dead body with the sort of the demon's grip let go. His mind elated; the blood splatter a sign of the world he had joined. He did it the name of another, in the name of a superior force that had been above him. He didn't believe in God, wouldn't believe in God. But he could believe in something greater, a force of beckoning greed and disillusionment with the world.

He looked to Lawrence and Garret with a face of splattered blood and heavy drooping eyes. Lawrence knew the young man wished to cry, but refused to look weak. It mattered little as

Lawrence had made his point, successfully made him a tool under his control. Beneath the brain matter and bloody mucous of the animal's skull was the beginnings of a changed man, a man corrupted by angels and demons.

While Mark glanced at them with the expression of a sad child, the two others smiled in agreement and nodded casually against the smoldering lights and accumulated pain in their bodies. Mark, still bothered by the relative silence cleared his throat and spoke.

“What?” he asked tasting the salty red streaks that contaminated his lips.

“Welcome to the family,” said Lawrence. “Welcome to seeing the truth.” And with that, Mark found grave admittance into the crime syndicate known as the family, through the careful exploitation of other men he believed to be mentors.